



Alabama Should Embrace Educational Freedom

Alabama's public schools continue to rank below the national average. Our leaders have incorrectly believed that increasing state funding would be the solution to academic success. Though the state portion of K-12 funding has increased by almost 15% in the past five years, increases in funding haven't increased test scores.

According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment, Alabama's fourth- and eighth-graders are below the national average in both reading and math. [In fact](#), NAEP eighth-grade math scores are the exact same as they were in 2000, 22 years ago, and eighth-grade reading NAEP scores are four points lower than they were in 1998, 24 years ago.



School choice acknowledges parents know best when it comes to their children's education, and it empowers them to live out this innate responsibility of raising and educating their children. There are many forms of school choice, but universal school choice benefits all students and gives families the most agency to use their tax paying dollars to follow their specific child to whatever educational services best fit their needs for – whether those needs are best filled at a public school, private school, charter school, homeschool, through tutoring, or any other learning environment chosen by the family.

Currently, there are three public educational choice options in Alabama. Traditional public schools (735,884 students within 1,360 schools), charter schools, and magnet schools. While charter schools are independently run public schools, the state's charter school rollout has been [slow](#), and while Alabama enacted its Charter School Law in 2015, there are currently only 13 charter schools across the state. Alabama does have 30 magnet schools, public education which usually focus on specific areas such as STEM. However, magnet schools aren't universally accessible to all students in the state since they are restricted to specific districts.

There are also two private school choice programs, the Alabama Accountability Act (AAA) and the Education Scholarship Program. Enacted in 2013, AAA is a refundable tax credit program, but it is restrictive to students who transfer from or are assigned to a failing public school to a non-failing public or private school. The State Department of Education labels the bottom 6% of public schools of standardized test scores in the state for reading, English and math as "failing" public schools. Only 56 students participated in the AAA in 2021.

The Education Scholarship Program is a tax-credit scholarship program. While 2,611 scholarships were awarded in the 2021-2022 school year, less than one percent of AL students used a scholarship. The program is restricted to families under 185 percent of the federal poverty level, so roughly one-third of Alabama students are eligible for a scholarship.

Unlike the limited programs that Alabama has employed in the past, universal school choice would create a volunteer educational savings program to give all parents and every student in the state have the options they need to be successful. With universal school choice, parents have the option to send their children to public schools, charter schools, private schools, take online-learning classes, or homeschool. School choice creates opportunities for success by allowing the free market to operate in the education sphere. More schooling options for students correlates with more teaching options for instructors. The competition of schools has even [proven](#) to increase teacher pay.



Additionally, increased competition can help address problems Alabama faces such as teacher shortages, low test scores, and low academic performance rankings. Alabama isn't the first state to consider school choice. Most states have more expansive programs than Alabama currently has, and they have been successfully administering them for decades. In fact, the first school program started more than 150 years ago in Vermont. Although Wisconsin became the first state to create a modern school voucher program in 1991, the race for most comprehensive school choice program (thus far)

was awarded to Arizona this past summer. The Grand Canyon State has become the gold standard for educational freedom by implementing ESAs for 100% of Arizonans. Similar legislation has been introduced around the country and currently five states have universal or near universal ESA programs:

West Virginia, [HB2013 \(2021\)](#) - Hope Scholarship

Arizona, [HB2853 \(2022\)](#) - Arizona Empowerment Scholarship Account

Iowa, [HJ68 \(2023\)](#) - Students First Act

Arkansas, [SB294 \(2023\)](#) - LEARNS Act

Utah, [HB215 \(2023\)](#) - Utah Fits All Scholarship Program

Looking more closely at Florida, there are several public-school options. Florida allows students to transfer to traditional public schools outside and within their district, they have more than 700 charter schools, and more than 600 magnet schools. In addition, Florida has private school ESAs, vouchers, and two-tax credit scholarships.



Some advocates against school choice assert that the freedom to choose schools will hurt traditional public schools. That hasn't been the case in Florida. Some also assert that school choice would disadvantage rural areas. However, in Florida, school choice has increased public school student's test scores and educational learning opportunities have flourished in rural areas. School choice has also created more opportunities for students in [rural areas](#). In the past 20 years, the number of private schools has increased from 69 to 120. In 2021-2022, 8,500 students used education choice scholarships in the state's thirty rural counties, which is roughly triple the number of rural students using private school choice programs over the past 10 years. In the late 1990s, Florida's NAEP scores were [nearly identical](#) to Alabama. For example, on the 1992 NAEP exam, [30 states](#) statistically outscored Florida's public school four-grade students in math. In 2022, no state scored significantly

higher. The same trend holds for fourth-grade reading. In [1992](#), 35 other states statistically outscored Florida's public schools. In 2022, no state significantly outscored Florida's public-school students.

Florida ranks [fifth](#) in the nation for the number of students that successfully pass its college-level Advanced Placement exams. [Studies](#) show that the expansion of Florida's voucher program contributed to high test scores of public-school students, but also reduced negative behavioral issues such as absenteeism and suspensions. Studying the state of Florida's progress on school choice highlights how having private school choice options specifically benefits those who chose to take part in the program, but also how educational freedom actually improves public schools.

Improving education in Alabama is a priority for nearly every Alabamian. However, the details and strategies remain up for debate. State leaders continue to increase K-12 funding with little to no academic progress. Alabama can benefit from the example of other states who have already discovered that significant individual and collective academic success is found in expanding school choice options and empowering parents to make the best decisions for their families when it comes to the education of their children.