

**HB 2550 Proponent Testimony
Student Empowerment Act
House K-12 Budget Committee
Jason Bedrick, EdChoice
February 1, 2022**

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jason Bedrick and I am the Director of Policy for EdChoice. EdChoice is a non-profit and non-partisan organization that works to advance educational freedom and choice for all as a pathway to successful lives and a stronger society.

The Student Empowerment Act would create a K-12 education savings account (ESA) for students with special needs or who are enrolled in a public school in a district that qualifies for free or reduced-price meals under the national school lunch act. The way this ESA works is similar to policies in 10 other states. ESAs empower families with the freedom and flexibility to customize their child's education. Families can use ESAs to pay for private school tuition and/or to purchase textbooks, tutoring, curricular materials, special-needs therapy, and a wide variety of educational products and services so that families can provide their children with the education that best meets their individual learning needs.

Whenever a state legislature considers the creation of a new educational choice policy, opponents claim that it would significantly harm or even "destroy" public education. If parents were given a choice, they argue, there would be a mass exodus from district schools, especially by the parents most concerned with education. The district schools would supposedly be left with the hardest-to-teach students and less resources to teach them, leading to a downward spiral.

Fortunately, the experience of several states with longstanding, robust educational choice policies shows that these concerns are unfounded. States like Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin have had educational choice policies for decades and not only is there no evidence that their public schools have been harmed, but the test scores in these states have all *improved* over the last two decades.

Take Florida, for example. Since enacting a tax-credit scholarship policy in 2001, Florida's choice sector has grown to the second largest per capita and the largest in the nation in absolute terms, with more than 180,000 students participating in the state's voucher, tax-credit scholarship and ESA programs.

From 2003 to 2020, Florida's gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have significantly outpaced the national average, increasing by 12.2 points and 6.7 points on 4th grade math and reading, and 7.2 points and 6.1 points on 8th grade math and reading. Likewise, **a recent study of the competitive effects of school choice on district schools in Florida found "consistent evidence that as more students use scholarships to attend private schools, students in public schools most likely to experience heightened competition due to the program see positive effects" on math and reading scores.**

Florida is not unique. Researchers at the University of Arkansas found a "strong and statistically significant association" between educational freedom (including the robustness of a state's school choice policies) and "both academic scores and academic gains." Indeed, **25 out of 28 empirical studies**

on the effects of voucher or tax-credit scholarship programs on the academic performance of students who remain at their traditional public schools find statistically significant positive effects. One finds no visible effect, and two find a small negative effect.

In short: educational choice is the rising tide that lifts all boats.

The purpose of public education is to ensure that every single child has access to a high-quality education that meets their individual learning needs. Policymakers should empower families to choose the learning environment that's the right fit for their child, no matter where they live. They can also rest assured that empowering individual families with the freedom to choose will not come at the expense of other students. Indeed, when each family has a variety of educational options from among which to choose, schools are more directly accountable to families, and every child is better off.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Jason Bedrick
Director of Policy, EdChoice

Citations

Bedrick, Jason, & Ed Tarnowski, "Who's Afraid of School Choice? Examining the Validity and Intensity of Predictions by School Choice Opponents," EdChoice, November 22, 2021.

<https://www.edchoice.org/research-library/?report=whos-afraid-of-school-choice#report>

Figlio, Daniel N., Hart, Cassandra M. D., & Karbowni, Krzysztof, (2020), Effects of Scaling Up Private School Choice Programs on Public School Student, NBER Working Paper No. 26758, 4.

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