



Parent Power!

Helping you make sense of schooling today

KNOW YOUR CHOICES

*Sowing the Seeds
of Education Reform*

A project of the Center for Education Reform



*Inspired by the old maxim
“knowledge is power” since 1999,
Parent Power! has been a valued resource
for parents who want to know more
about the issues that affect
their children’s education.*



The Center for Education Reform

www.edreform.com

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*Changing laws, minds and cultures
to allow good schools to flourish.*



If, in America we have freedom of choice, why can't we choose where we send our children to school?



School choice means giving parents the power and opportunity to choose the school their child will attend. As a parent, you know what is best for your child and should be able to put that knowledge to work to find the perfect educational situation for your child.

Traditionally, children are assigned to a public school according to where they live, in a one size fits all model. Some people already have school choice because they can afford to move to a location with better schools, or they can enroll their child in a private school.

Until recently, parents without such means had no choice. They had to send their child to the school assigned to them by the local school district regardless of the school's quality or the appropriateness for their child. Thanks to changes in both state and federal laws, that is no longer the case.

What Kinds of School Choice Exist Today?

- 1. Private School Choice** (also known as vouchers or scholarships)
- 2. Charter Schools**
- 3. Virtual Schools**
- 4. Home Schooling**
- 5. Public School Choice**
- 6. Private Scholarship Programs**

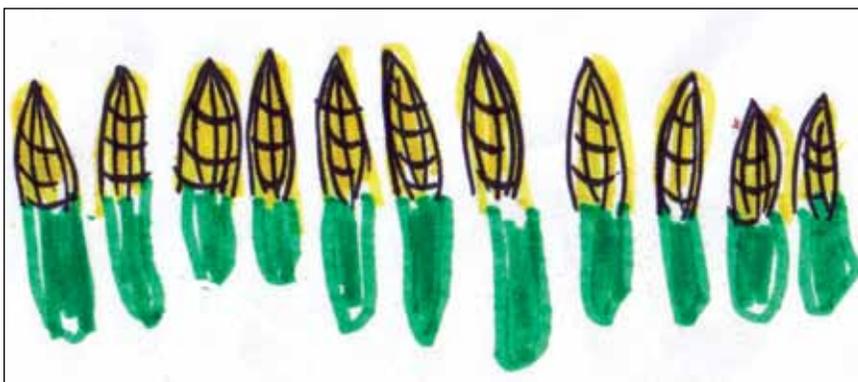
These are several ways to give parents school choice but unfortunately these choices are not available to everyone and may not be available to you. Your opportunities change often, however. So after you have learned about school choice and whether it is available to you, check back with us often regarding changes.

1. Private School Choice – Vouchers

Private school choice extends your school choice options to private schools, with the money allocated for your child's education following her to the school of her choice, private or public. Also called vouchers or publicly-funded scholarships, a few states have set up programs to allow a certain number of students to have this opportunity. They are often limited to parents of lesser means or to special needs students.

For example, in Georgia, over 1,500 students with special needs get on average \$6,300 dollars to attend the private school of their choice. In Washington DC, 2,000 low-income children were given the opportunity to attend private schools, but because these kinds of programs are opposed by many education groups, they only exist in a few states and with many restrictions. There were approximately ten full school choice programs operating in the United States as of August 2009. Additional information is enclosed regarding current programs.

There may also be a tax credit program in your state that creates scholarships. In seven states, corporate tax credit programs give businesses the ability to contribute to a qualified scholarship program that in turn gives financial support to students to attend a private school of choice. Again, consult the enclosed literature for a list of these programs.



2. Charter Schools

Charter schools are innovative, public schools designed by educators, parents or civic leaders that are open by choice, accountable for results, and free from most rules and regulations governing conventional public schools. Although they are public schools, most charters are free of many regulations that hinder public schools. In 2009 more than 4,600 charter schools are serving more than 1.3 million children in forty states plus the District of Columbia.

Charter schools are independent public schools that must perform well, and attract parents, to stay in business. They are authorized by publicly-approved groups such as state and local school boards, universities, independent boards and non-profit organizations. Oftentimes parents and teachers join together to create charter schools. Many charters are also part of larger regional or national networks and benefit from a connection to a larger group of schools. A charter school must meet state regulations regarding open admission policies, health and safety standards and comply with civil rights laws; but they have the flexibility to design their own curriculum, hire personnel, and set schedules.

Charter school students must meet the same standards as all other public schools and must show satisfactory achievement equal to or better than the state average. If they fail their charter can be revoked, adding an extra layer of accountability to these schools that does not exist in traditional public education.

To find a charter school in your area visit:

www.yourcharterschool.com.

3. Virtual Schools

More than 90,000 students from kindergarten through high school are enrolled in virtual charter schools nationwide. Virtual schools operate just like public schools with walls, except the teachers and students are not physically together. There are teachers, however—qualified, licensed teachers – who assign, conduct live lessons, monitor and teach students. Parents or other adults are expected to act as learning coaches for the student at home.

Virtual charter schooling is currently available in these 21 states:

Alaska	Hawaii	Nevada
Arkansas	Idaho	Ohio
Arizona	Illinois	Oregon
California	Kansas	Pennsylvania
Colorado	Minnesota	South Carolina
Florida	Missouri	Wisconsin
Georgia	New Hampshire	Wyoming

4. Home Schooling

Some parents choose to home school their child because it offers the most flexibility and autonomy in their child's education. It is estimated that there are approximately one million home schooling families today. Home schooling is sanctioned by most state laws that recognize accepted programs and graduation benchmarks much in the same way traditional education is recognized.

While it takes an enormous time commitment to run a successful home school, there are dozens of exceptional programs available to help you and many parents create cooperatives to work together, sharing responsibility for individual classwork or physical education, the arts and sciences. For more information, contact the Home School Legal Defense Association at www.hslda.org.

5. Public School Choice

Public school choice or open enrollment works within established school systems and lets parents choose among selected public schools other than the one assigned to them.

Most states allow some form of public school choice but such options are often controlled by sending or receiving school districts, so choices are often limited. In a few states, students are widely encouraged to cross district lines. States such as Arizona, Georgia and Minnesota allow statewide open enrollment as well as postsecondary options which allow students in high school to take college courses for high school credit.

If you believe your assigned public school is not the right fit for your child and do not have access to the other, more diverse options available and described here, you should inquire whether a different public school could be the choice for you.

States currently permitting public school choice are:

Alaska	Kentucky	Ohio*
Arizona	Louisiana	Oklahoma
Arkansas	Maine*	Oregon*
California*	Massachusetts*	Pennsylvania*
Colorado	Michigan*	Rhode Island*
Connecticut	Minnesota	South Carolina*
Delaware	Mississippi	South Dakota
Florida*	Missouri	Tennessee*
Georgia	Montana*	Texas
Hawaii*	Nebraska	Utah
Idaho*	Nevada	Vermont*
Illinois	New Hampshire	Washington
Indiana*	New Jersey*	West Virginia*
Iowa	New Mexico*	Wisconsin
Kansas*	New York*	Wyoming*
	North Dakota*	

** denotes states with limited or voluntary public school choice policies.*

6. Private Scholarships

Private Scholarship programs provide low-income children with financial aid opportunities that assist them in paying a portion of tuition for a child to attend a private school.

There are a variety of private scholarship programs around the nation. Student-sponsor programs, boarding school programs, religiously affiliated, archdiocesan and other Catholic school aid programs, and community scholarship programs have been providing parents a choice for years.

If you are not sure whether there is a private scholarship program in your community visit www.edreform.com/psp/ for additional information.

Contact the program in your community for information on how to apply. You may also want to check with the school in which you are interested to see what programs they may have to assist you.



How to Make Good Choices

Tips for Choosing a School



Once parents have been given the right to choose a school, the next step is to be prepared. Arming yourself with information can make a huge difference in finding the right match for your child. It is very important at this time to equip yourself with data to help you make this important decision. Visit www.edreform.com/school-report-cards/ for general information about a particular school.

When considering a school, ask some basic questions:

- What is the goal or mission of the school?
- Does the school seek to make every child successful in every subject? How?
- What makes the school different?
- What happens when children fail?
- How does the school's performance stack up in comparison to what the state expects of students?
- How are teachers hired, evaluated and rewarded?

Also be ready to answer questions about your child. If you are looking for a new school, think of the reasons why. Are you looking for a better curriculum, a smaller school, or teachers more receptive to the individual needs of your child? To find the right match, parents need to create a positive dialogue in which they open up about the needs of their child and find the most relevant information about potential schools.

No Child Left Behind



It is a simple premise: Children should be educated in the schools that were set up to serve them. The federal government has told states that they must educate children or give families new tools to seek their own best education — which may be a traditional public school or a charter school.

One of these tools is the ability to choose another public school. Unfortunately, there often are not enough good public schools in all neighborhoods from which to choose. School districts are not giving parents a wide variety of choices! This is another reason that independent public schools, like charters, are important.



Is your school on the failing school list?

Report Cards: States are required to issue report cards to inform parents about a school's progress and to share specific performance information including how students in each grade are performing and how well teachers are doing. It is these report cards that tell parents whether or not their child's school is on the "needs improvement" list.

Visit www.edreform.com/school-report-cards/ for general information about a particular school.

Testing: Testing is intended to raise student achievement and level the playing field for all children. States must establish standards for reading and math and EVERY child is expected to be able to read, write, add and subtract at their grade level, regardless of their family's socio-economic status.

Teacher Quality: School districts are required to notify parents of their "right to know" about the qualifications of their child's teacher. That means they should have a degree in their field and have obtained a state-approved license.

Choices: NCLB gives parents of children in ailing schools some important options. Once they learn that they live in a failing district and their child is not learning, parents may transfer their child to a higher performing school in the district, including a charter school.

Safety: Not only must students be in schools that teach effectively, but they must also be in safe, non-threatening environments. The law gives parents the "Unsafe School Choice Option."

Tips For Talking to Your Child's Teacher



Solving problems your child may be having in school is rarely an easy or short-term exercise. Don't be intimidated. When a problem occurs in the classroom many parents question their instincts and push their concerns aside. Often parents assume teachers are experts and must know what is best for their child. In general, teachers welcome the input from the parent. Studies show that teachers actually want parents to be more involved in their child's education. When a situation arises you owe it to your child to find the cause of the problem. Often the matter can be cleared up easily with a parent/teacher/student conference.

However – Do not hesitate to go over the teacher's head to a higher authority in your advocacy for your child.

If the problem appears to stem from the teacher's curriculum or the school's curriculum, set up a meeting with the principal. If this meeting does not bring satisfactory results, try contacting other parents with similar concerns. Arrange a group discussion with the principal or teacher. Remember, the airing of issues should lead to a better understanding and a positive action.

Parent-Teacher Conferences



The tradition of parent-teacher conferences takes place about eight weeks into the school year. It is an event that often pairs anxious parents with a nervous teacher. Often it is the first time parents discuss their child with the teacher. For teachers, hours are spent preparing back-to-back meetings where they have to concisely explain the academic and social performance of 20 or more students, having only known them for two months.

This is the perfect opportunity for you to see and review the curriculum for the year. Take advantage of this so you are aware of the goals your child is expected to achieve by the end of the year.

There are ways to develop a relationship with you child's teacher so that there are no surprises in your parent-teacher conference. Remember knowledge is power!

Be a proactive parent! Introduce yourself early on. Volunteer in the classroom. If this is not possible send a note to set up a time for a phone call or short meeting.

At the conference, the teacher should be prepared with notes, suggestions, and samples of your child's work. You, too, should be prepared. Make a list of questions and concerns you have.

The parent-teacher conference should not be the first time you hear your child is having a problem. If you have established a relationship with the teacher you can communicate as soon as there are signs of trouble.

Take advantage of the additional staff at the school, such as the counselor, reading specialist, or even the principal. If necessary, set up a meeting with them. Remember, if a child is showing signs of a learning disability, parents can request testing even if the teacher does not suggest it.

If you only hear positive news about your child, still ask questions. Make sure your child is being challenged. Find out how their work compares to classmates. Find out how they get along with others. Ask about their strengths and weaknesses.

Most importantly, follow up with the teacher and maintain a good working relationship. It is YOUR job to make your child a priority for the teacher. Be careful not to be overbearing or dominating. Your goal is to make sure you keep the doors of communication wide open for the benefit of your child.

To help you understand how knowledge is power, please visit the Parent Power Section of our website at www.edreform.com/ParentPower. Parent Power is what you need to help you get the answers you deserve, about your child's education and about how schools are run in general.



You Can Make a Difference!

VOTE: One of the most important things you can do as a parent is to stay informed on education issues and a candidate's view of education.

Remember, if you believe education reform is vital, you need to vote for candidates who share your views, regardless of party or politics.

Cast the best vote for your children, your schools and your communities. Be sure to voice your support for education reform by contacting your elected officials through the Grassroots Action Center at www.edreform.com/getactive.

GET ACTIVE AND GET INVOLVED: If you want a school choice program in your state or community, organize a group of parents and community leaders and make your wishes known to your elected officials.

It is important to learn all that you can about how schools work and then turn that knowledge into action for your children.

Become an active parent by downloading CER's Grassroots Action Toolkit at www.edreform.com/toolkit/grassroots.pdf.

START A SCHOOL: Take it a step further and learn How to Start Charter School at www.edreform.com/toolkit/startaschool.pdf.

THE Center for Education Reform



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