

# TALKING



# 'SCHOOL



# CHOICE'

Trends, Impacts, and Strategic  
Communications Insights

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**Sachs**MEDIA

# WHAT IF JUST BELIEVING YOU HAVE SCHOOL CHOICE MADE YOU MORE SATISFIED WITH YOUR K-12 EDUCATION SYSTEM?

Our original, first-time-published research shows that perception alone can boost public confidence in K-12 education — but that’s only half the story. The reality of school choice policy design, access, and implementation matter too, and both are deeply influenced by how these issues are communicated.

In this report, we share original data and case studies to illustrate how states that offer meaningful educational options — of various kinds, including many models that operate fully within public school systems — often experience higher satisfaction with education policy, stronger public engagement, and, in some cases, better classroom outcomes.

But none of these influences alone — not perception, nor policy itself — can fully bloom without a tandem, compelling communications strategy. Our findings point to a central conclusion for leaders working in education policy, public affairs, and communications: how we talk about school choice is just as consequential as the policy itself. Messaging, storytelling, and trust-building matter immensely for public trust, parental empowerment, and most importantly, sustainable educational gains.

Join us as we walk through these findings, opening with the takeaways that translate directly into action items for policy, communications, and public affairs professionals working in this space.

# SIX STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & COMMS PROFESSIONALS

Several themes emerge consistently from the data and case studies examined in this report:



## School choice exists in many forms.

This isn't simply a debate about public vs. private education, but rather, a conversation about how even within public systems, meaningful choices matter and drive favorable sentiment and outcomes.



## Awareness matters.

Our research indicates that public satisfaction with K-12 education is strongly associated with whether people believe options exist, often more so than with the technical details of policy design. States and districts that offer choice but fail to communicate clearly about available options may not see the public confidence gains those policies could otherwise generate.



## Lived experience resonates more than ideology.

Spotlight the stories of real families whose lives have been changed by having educational options, whether through district-run programs, charter schools, or other choice mechanisms. Their voices are consistently more persuasive than abstract arguments. Personal experiences with school choice is associated with higher satisfaction.



## Messaging about empowerment and fit outperforms partisan framing.

Emphasize parent empowerment, educational equity, and the right of every child to a high-quality education that fits their unique needs. These are the messages that resonate, far beyond technical or ideological framings, even among audiences initially skeptical of school choice policies.



## School choice does not have to be framed as a zero-sum game.

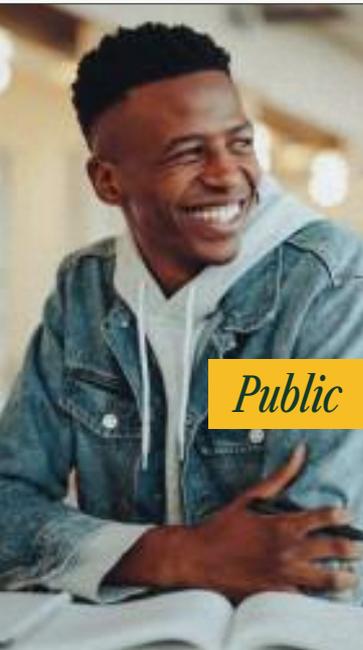
A growing body of research suggests that, under certain conditions, public schools can respond positively to competitive pressure or increased flexibility. Emphasize innovation, responsiveness, and shared outcomes, rather than winners and losers, to build sustainable coalitions.



## Coalitions matter.

Policymakers and advocates who partner with grassroots parent organizations, community leaders, and research institutions are better positioned to respond to legal, political, and public scrutiny, and ultimately improve program designs over time.

# THE SCHOOL CHOICE LANDSCAPE



*Public*



*Charter*



*Private*



*Virtual School*



*Homeschooling*

School choice has emerged as one of the most dynamic and debated education policy areas across the United States. In a majority of states, a variety of programs enable parents to select the educational environment that best suits their child's unique needs, whether through public, charter, private, or virtual school or homeschooling.

The extent to which these options are available, and supported through public funds, varies widely. States like **Florida, Arizona, West Virginia, and Arkansas** have pursued expansive, sometimes universal, models of school choice, offering education savings accounts (ESAs), tax-credit scholarships, and broad open enrollment policies.

Other states, such as **Massachusetts and Washington**, maintain more limited approaches, emphasizing interdistrict transfers or charter schools with enrollment caps and regulatory guardrails.

School closures, prolonged remote learning, and renewed debates over curriculum and accountability increased public attention on educational alternatives. Between 2021 and 2024, a record number



Over time, the national trend has *shifted strongly toward expanded school choice*, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic.

of state legislatures introduced and passed school choice legislation, much of it expanding eligibility for ESAs and modernizing existing tax credit programs.

While early school choice policies were often limited to specific student populations – such as those with disabilities or low-income families – recent initiatives in several states have aimed for broader eligibility models. In fact, Florida, Iowa, Ohio, and seven other states offer universal school choice, while many also maintain population-specific scholarships and resources.

## THE MANY FLAVORS OF CHOICE

While the national conversation on school choice often focuses on alternatives outside traditional public schools (like charters, ESAs, and private school vouchers), many public school districts are advancing choice within the system itself without any incentives or opportunities for private competition.

**Across the country, public schools and districts are expanding intra- and inter-district choice, launching specialized magnet and theme-based programs, and offering academic pathways designed to *better fit students' interests and unique needs.***

For example, **Denver Public Schools** operates an open enrollment system where families can rank their preferred public schools, regardless of neighborhood boundaries. The district also offers a wide array of magnet programs and theme-based schools focused on STEM, bilingual education, and the arts. **Minneapolis Public Schools** runs a similar approach with citywide options and "community schools" that offer unique academic pathways.

**Florida** mandates public school districts offer controlled open enrollment, enabling families to apply to public schools beyond their zoned assignments when capacity allows. This intra-public-school choice, sometimes called "open enrollment" or "public school portability", offers families greater agency while keeping them within the traditional public system.



Other districts are innovating through specialized academies and public school models, such as **New York City's** extensive portfolio of public high schools with distinct themes – from performing arts to STEM to international studies – admitting students citywide through choice-based applications.

Similarly, **Dallas ISD's** “Public School Choice Initiative” creates neighborhood schools with distinct instructional models, like Montessori, dual-language immersion, or personalized learning. These schools remain fully public but offer families meaningful options, supporting the notion that educational customization isn't synonymous with privatization.

These examples demonstrate that expanding choice doesn't inherently require exiting the public system; it can mean reimagining from within.



As demand for customization and flexibility grows, many public schools are responding by offering the kinds of options parents want: diverse programs, specialized learning environments, and the

*freedom to choose what works best for their child.*

# THE PERCEPTION OF CHOICE (AND EXPERIENCE WITH IT!) MATTERS MOST FOR SATISFACTION

To better understand how Americans view school choice, and how those views relate to confidence in K-12 education, Sachs Media conducted a national (random sample) survey of 1,000 adults across all 50 states, and asked them common questions about their satisfaction with:

- The quality of public K-12 education in their state
- The quality of public education in their state compared with others
- The level of school choice present in their state
- Their experience with educational options
- Their support for school choice

Respondents were also categorized based on the degree of school choice present in their state, ranging from minimal to universal.

Perceived choice correlates with satisfaction in the education system, and the results tell a fascinating story.

## SATISFACTION WITH STATE'S EDUCATION

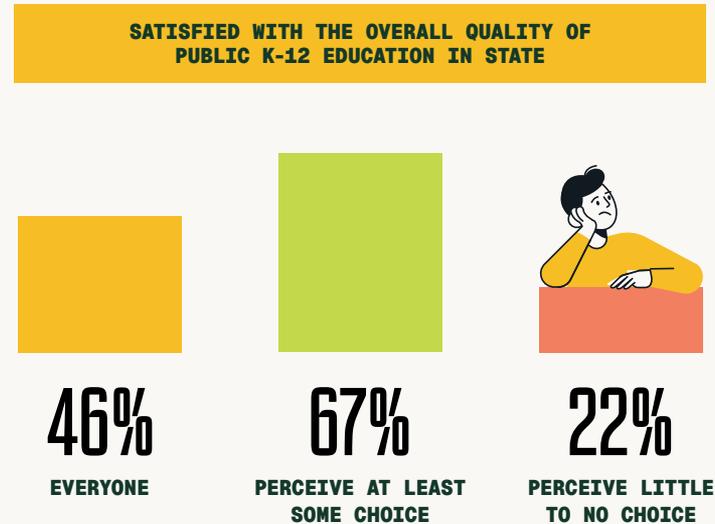


**46% of Americans say they are satisfied with their state's education system, though only 17% are "very satisfied." These numbers point to a widespread perception that the current system is falling short.**

But here's where things get interesting: when Americans think that parents and students in their state have choice, or say they've had experience with school choice themselves, satisfaction with K-12 education spikes.

Notably, the data indicates that a state having school choice policies is not sufficient on its own. Public awareness and understanding of those policies are critical drivers of confidence.

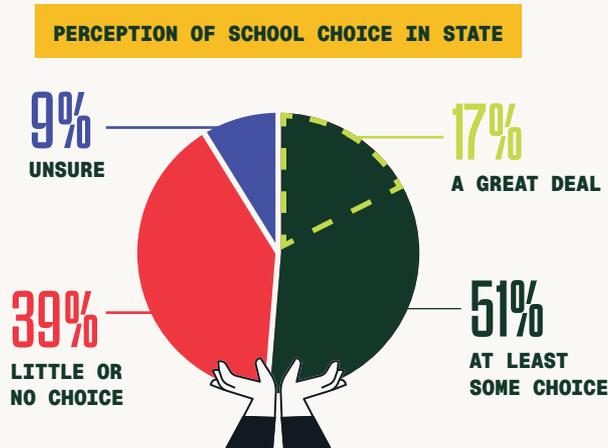
Less than half of Americans feel satisfied with their state's education; however, satisfaction is significantly higher among those who perceive that their state offers some level of choice (67%) compared with those who perceive little to no choice (22%).



By instituting some level of school choice and raising awareness of these programs, Americans' satisfaction in the system will grow. A state having school choice is not enough; residents must perceive choice in order to raise approval in the system.

But here's the kicker: Americans are largely unaware of the reality of choice in their state

Despite strong opinions about school choice, most Americans struggle to accurately identify whether such options exist in their state. Just half (51%) perceive at least some choice, including 17% who believe there is “a great deal.” Another 39% believe there is little or no choice, and 9% are unsure.



Despite these strong opinions, there is no actual correlation between public perception and actual policy. In some cases, Americans living in states with robust school choice programs are unaware that those options exist. Even more striking, residents of states with little or no private school choice were sometimes more likely to believe they had choice than residents in states that actually do.

## **EXPERIENCE WITH SCHOOL CHOICE LEADS TO EVEN GREATER SATISFACTION**

Americans with personal experience in school choice are **11 percentage points more likely to be satisfied** with the K-12 system than those without such experience.

The share of Americans who feel “very satisfied” with public education in their state is more than double among those with school choice experience (25%) than those without (12%). To increase satisfaction with the K-12 system, school choice must be widely accessible and well-understood. When families are unable to participate, they may feel the system is not truly serving their needs. Clear information and streamlined enrollment processes are essential for building public confidence and engagement.

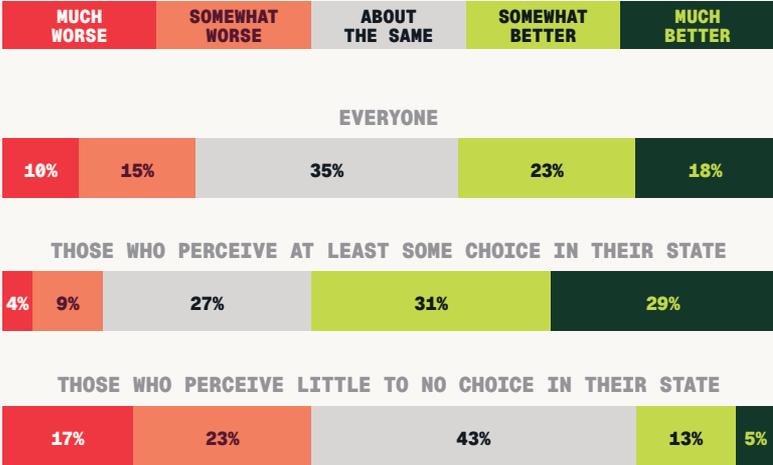
The takeaway is clear: public satisfaction grows not only when states expand school choice but when families are able to participate in it. Expanding access and providing clear, accessible information are essential steps to strengthening public confidence in K-12 education.



**PERCEIVED CHOICE RESULTS IN PEOPLE RANKING THEIR OWN STATE'S EDUCATION SYSTEM AS BETTER COMPARED WITH OTHER STATES**

Fewer than half of Americans (46%) are satisfied with their state's K-12 education system, and even fewer (41%) believe it is better than most others. Just 18% think their state's system is "much better," suggesting that pride in public education is low.

**HOW PEOPLE PERCEIVE THE QUALITY OF K-12 EDUCATION IN THEIR OWN STATE COMPARED WITH OTHER STATES**





Out of the 41% of Americans who believe their state's public education system is "better" than most other states, 3 out of 5 (60%) perceive their state as having at least a moderate level of school choice. Perceived access to educational options seems to fuel a sense of pride in the state's system.

**OUT OF THE 41% WHO BELIEVE THEIR STATE'S SYSTEM IS "BETTER"**



## PERSONAL EXPOSURE TO SCHOOL CHOICE IS RISING AMONG YOUNGER AMERICANS, BUT POLITICAL DIVIDES IN EXPERIENCE REMAIN

Roughly 39% of Americans say they or someone in their household has used a school choice option, while 61% have not. Certain demographic trends are worth watching.

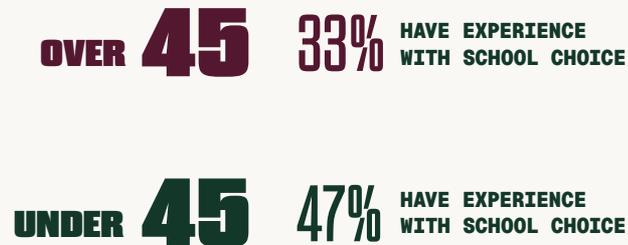
For example, 47% of those under the age of 45 report having experience with school choice, compared to only 33% of those over 45. The generational shift could signal increasing familiarity and comfort with educational alternatives in the years ahead.

### SCHOOL CHOICE EXERCISED

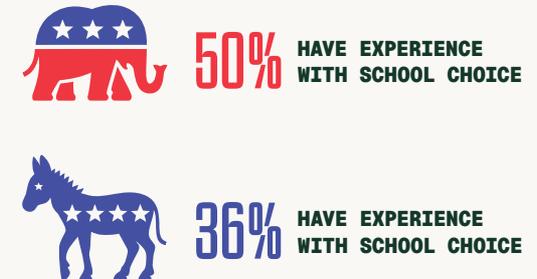
#### IN GENERAL



#### BY AGE



#### BY POLITICAL AFFILIATION



Half of Republicans report personal or household experience with school choice, compared to 36% of Democrats. Notably, 70% of independents say they have had no exposure to school choice programs, which represents both a challenge and an opportunity for policymakers to expand engagement.

## A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS SUPPORT AT LEAST ONE FORM OF SCHOOL CHOICE

**75%** SUPPORT AT LEAST ONE SCHOOL CHOICE OPTION (ESA, VOUCHERS, OR TAX CREDITS).

**53%** SUPPORT EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS (ESAS).

**38%** SUPPORT VOUCHERS FOR PRIVATE SCHOOL TUITION.

**37%** SUPPORT TAX CREDITS FOR NON-PUBLIC SCHOOL USE.

Political affiliation influences support levels, but not as sharply as one might think. Support for school choice crosses party lines: Democrats are twice as likely as Republicans to oppose all options, but 72% of Democrats still support at least one form of choice.

Personal experience with school choice *significantly increases* the likelihood of support for all school choice options. This reinforces the idea that greater engagement and access are key to building broader public backing.



# THE PERCEPTION GAP & HOW TO NAVIGATE IT

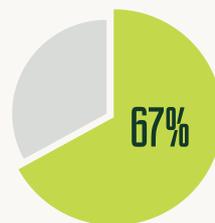
The data reveals a striking disconnect between reality and perception when it comes to school choice. Most Americans cannot accurately identify whether their state has school choice policies or not. In fact, residents of states with no private school choice programs are equally or even more likely to believe they have choice than are residents of states that actually do make that option available to parents.

When we break this down along political lines, one of the most surprising findings emerges: Democrats in states without school choice perceive more choice than do Democrats in states that actually do have it. This could suggest more than just a lack of awareness – it may reflect a desire to keep the status quo, coupled with an ideological perspective of school choice. In contrast, Republicans show consistent perceptions regardless of whether they live in states with or without choice.

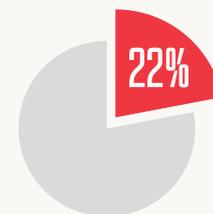
Our analysis reveals that perception matters politically, meaning that this perception gap must be addressed by policymakers.

Reviewing our key findings, we see that 67% of those who believe their state offers at least a moderate level of school choice express satisfaction with their state's K-12 public education system. But among those who perceive little or no choice, satisfaction drops to just 22%. Furthermore, those with direct experience using school choice programs are far more likely to believe they live in a state with choice (62%) than those without that experience (45%).

## SATISFACTION INFLUENCED BY PERCEIVED SCHOOL CHOICE



**AMONG THOSE WHO BELIEVE STATE OFFERS AT LEAST A MODERATE LEVEL OF SCHOOL CHOICE**



**AMONG THOSE WHO BELIEVE STATE OFFERS LITTLE TO NO SCHOOL CHOICE**

For policymakers and education leaders, this implies that shaping public understanding with accurate, transparent messaging is just as important as passing new policies. State-level examples show both the potential and the fragility of school choice initiatives.



Arizona and West Virginia demonstrate how incremental reform, parent engagement, bipartisan framing, and clear legislative ownership can support program durability, even amid legal and political scrutiny.

Illinois illustrates the opposite dynamic: the Invest in Kids Act provided tax-credit scholarships to thousands of students but included a sunset provision that allowed the program to expire once political alignment shifted. Opponents raised concerns about funding and equity, while supporters struggled to secure long-term institutional support.

These cases reinforce a critical lesson: policy success depends as much on coalition-building, communications, and durability as on initial passage.

# CONCLUSION

School choice is no longer a fringe policy idea. It is a mainstream, growing feature of the American education landscape. It takes many shapes, both within public school systems exclusively or between public and private entities, encompassing system innovation, alternative delivery models, and deeply held values about access and accountability.

The data in this report suggests that perception, experience, and communication play outsized roles in shaping public confidence and policy sustainability. For leaders navigating this landscape, success demands more than legislation alone. It requires clear storytelling, credible data, and strategies that build trust across ideological lines.

Understanding how people experience and perceive school choice – and why – is essential for anyone working to improve educational outcomes in a politically divided environment.



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