

Fact Sheet: School Choice

Whether a military-connected family is moving with school-aged children or just wants ensure the best education for their children in their current location, they need to be equipped with information about their child’s educational options. To provide such options for families and guardians, 46 states and the District of Columbia have adopted various public school choice options. Nearly half—46 percent—of parents report that they have a choice of schools, and 16 percent of students attend a school of their choice, up from 11 percent in 1993.¹

States and school districts may offer a wide range of schooling options for parents. This fact sheet presents an overview of the types of school choice policies, major choices, and specialized program options that military families will face when choosing a school for their child, as well as links to additional information.

Types of Choice Policies

There are three major school choice policies that allow parents to choose schools for their children.

Interdistrict Choice

Under Interdistrict Choice, about 15 states allow parents to choose to have their children attend any school within the state, in any school district. However, some states restrict such choices to students attending low-performing schools, or allow receiving districts to restrict choices if space is limited. No state provides transportation to students crossing district boundaries.

Intradistrict Choice

Under Intradistrict Choice, most states and many school districts allow parents to enroll their children in any school within a district. Not all districts provide transportation for these students, however. Importantly, in some cases, districts “control” choices to limit racial segregation. The Federal government, under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, requires districts to allow students who attend schools in need of improvement to transfer to higher-performing schools.

Voucher Programs

Voucher programs provide certificates authorized by the government that can be applied toward tuition at a private, parochial, or other school rather than a local public school. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of voucher programs in 2002; however, state courts have struck down voucher programs

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *The Condition of Education 2009* (NCES 2009–081), [Indicator 32](#).

in Arizona and Florida. Ohio and Wisconsin provide vouchers to enable a limited number of low-income families to enroll their children in private or parochial schools in Cleveland and Milwaukee, respectively. The Federal government had established a similar program for families in Washington, D.C. In 2011, Indiana passed an expansive publicly funded voucher program.

Types of School Choices

In addition to allowing parents to transfer their children to schools outside their local attendance zones, states have also authorized the creation of a variety of school options for families:

Alternative Schools

These public schools offer alternative curriculum or school schedules for students with disciplinary problems or those who cannot function in a traditional school environment. Often, these schools provide an opportunity for high school students to meet their graduation requirements through a schedule that also allows students to work during the day. There are more than 6,200 alternative schools in the United States, and the largest number of alternative schools is in Texas.

Charter Schools

Charter Schools are public schools designed and operated by educators, parents, community leaders, education entrepreneurs, and others. An authorizing agency—often the school board but in some cases a university or a mayor—grants a charter school a charter to operate for a limited period of time. The authorizing agency monitors the school to ensure that it is fiscally sound and meets performance targets. The agency can grant an additional charter or shut down the school if it fails to meet its goals. Charter schools are open to any student who applies; however, in nearly all cases schools must hold a lottery to select students if it is over-subscribed. There are currently 5,453 charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia, which educate 1.7 million students, including a handful on military bases.

Magnet Schools

These are public schools designed to facilitate school desegregation by “attracting” students from outside the school’s neighborhood. Magnet schools often focus on a specific subject, such as science or the arts, or provide programs for gifted and talented students. Some magnet schools require students to take an exam or demonstrate knowledge or skill in the specialty to gain admission. Magnet schools also conduct lotteries to select students if over-subscribed and employ other procedures to maintain racial balance.

Private Schools

About 10 percent of U.S. students attend private or nonpublic schools, about 80 percent of which are religiously affiliated. Other independent schools are based on a particular educational philosophy or approach to learning, such as Montessori or Waldorf schools. Students generally must apply for admission and pay tuition or fees to attend. Private and religious schools generally fall outside of Federal and state regulation, because they do not accept government funds; however, nonsectarian schools are prohibited from discrimination in admissions, and states can regulate their programs in areas such as health, safety, and teacher certification, as long as they do not impinge on the free exercise of religion or parents' rights to direct the education of their children.

Homeschooling

Homeschooling is instruction offered in the home, usually by a child's parent or guardian, which might include virtual learning programs conducted over the Internet and/or consortia of parents who collaborate to provide additional education options and support. About 1.5 million students were homeschooled in 2007, up from 850,000 in 1999. Most states have general guidelines about the grade-level program of study for students who are homeschooled to ensure they meet graduation requirements and are fully prepared for post-secondary options. These regulations need to be carefully regarded by parents if they want to ensure that their child will complete his or her education according to state regulations.

Virtual Schools

Virtual schools curricula range from part-time supplemental courses that students take online in addition to their regular classroom courses, to complete online schooling. Overall, about 700,000 students were enrolled in virtual schools in 2006, twice the number than in 2003. Half the states operate virtual high schools, and Michigan requires every student to take at least one online course. Virtual learning can either be exclusively provided online, or contain "blended" learning elements, where the student is participating in classes that are delivered partially online and partially in face-to-face settings. This option is particularly useful for students who

- need additional credits to graduate or must obtain credit recovery;
- seek classes not offered at the local school; and
- may not be able to attend face-to-face classes due to location or other reasons.

Specialized Programs

In addition to various types of schools, many public schools offer specialized programs within their schools:

Dual Enrollment Programs

Nearly nine out of ten high schools offer students the opportunity to earn college credit while still in high school. These programs include Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs, which enable students to earn credit when they enroll in college if they pass an examination, as well as programs that allow students to take courses on college campuses while still enrolled in high school. In some cases, students must pay tuition or fees to enroll in college classes, and most pay for the costs of the exams.

Special Education Programs

The Federal Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires schools to offer programs and services to students with disabilities. The types of services provided to a child with disabilities are documented in an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a document agreed to by the school, a counselor, and the parents. Depending on the IEP, students might be taught by specially trained and credentialed teachers, and schools may offer a modified classroom structure or curriculum. Districts may also send children who cannot receive necessary special education services locally to other schools or private special education schools.

More Information on School Choice

School Choice is an important and personal issue for families. Having access to the best and most current information about locally available options is the first step toward making the most appropriate decision about your child's education.

- The U.S. Department of Education has produced a document called *Choosing a School for Your Child*, which includes checklists and relevant questions to help parents make an informed choice about school. The document is available online at www.ed.gov/parents/schools/find/choose/index.html.
- The National School Boards Association provides a repository of state laws and policies on school choice. It can be found at <http://www.nsba.org/site/index.asp>.
- The Center for Education Reform also provides information on the status of school choice across the country. Information can be found at <http://www.edreform.com/Home/>.
- Military OneSource is a useful resource for obtaining information on schools. Users can access the service toll free from the United States at 1-800-342-9647 or from overseas at 1-800-3429-6477 or access the service for a charge from overseas at 1-484-530-5908. In addition, their Web site at <http://www.militaryonesource.com/> offers information on school choice issues.