

Educational Choice Myth and Facts 2025

SUMMARY

Unfortunately, conversations about education choice are fraught with myths about accountability, funding, and who qualifies for choice programs. This fact sheet addresses the most common myths.

ACADEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY

MYTH: School choice programs lack accountability.

FACT: Parental satisfaction is the ultimate form of accountability.

- There is no accountability for low-achieving public schools that fail to produce academic results.
 - Public schools that repeatedly score in the bottom 15 percent on Keystone and Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) exams have received increased education funding from the state, yet fail to improve outcomes.
- There are 211,000 kids across the state attending 383 low-achieving schools.¹ Sixty-seven percent of these schools have, for six or more years, been among Pennsylvania's low-achieving schools, with kids trapped in a failing school for their entire elementary, middle, or high school tenure and no hope of improvement.
 - The School District of Philadelphia, at 141, has the highest number of low-achieving schools. Fifty-four percent (64,207) of Philadelphia's students attend a low-achieving public school.
- Private schools are accountable to parents and stand to lose tuition dollars when parents are dissatisfied with academic outcomes.
 - The 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), or Nation's Report Card, released in January, shows 69 percent of Pennsylvania public school eighth graders not proficient in math, with an equal 69 percent who cannot read at grade level. The commonwealth's fourth graders, at less than half proficient in either math or reading, did not do much better.²
 - Notably, the latest NAEP results underline that Pennsylvania public schools have made no measurable improvement since 2003 to close achievement gaps of more than 25 points for Black and Hispanic students, economically disadvantaged students, or English language learners.³
 - The NAEP, administered every two years, in 2022 revealed that Catholic school students excelled during the COVID-19 pandemic, while public school students lost ground.⁴
- No student should have to attend a failing school because of a zip code. Pennsylvania families want and need more options beyond the traditional public school.

- Parent demand for tax credit scholarships far exceeds supply. The Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) and Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit (OSTC) scholarship programs help low-income families in Pennsylvania afford private school tuition. However, arbitrary program caps turned away nearly one out of two students who applied for these scholarships.
- Students stuck in low-achieving public schools need alternatives. Two separate but similar initiatives, the Pennsylvania Award for Student Success Scholarship Program (PASS), proposed in Senate Bill (SB)10, and Lifeline Scholarships, in House Bill (HB) 1489, would provide tuition scholarships of up to \$10,000 per student—including those turned away from EITC and OSTC scholarships—for kids living in the catchment area of a low-achieving public school, providing a pathway to success for families to customize education to fit the unique needs of their children.⁵

MYTH: Pennsylvania is a leader in public education.

FACT: Pennsylvania is a leader in education spending but trails in educational outcomes.

- College readiness is down. In 2023, fewer than half of Pennsylvania's graduating high school seniors took the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), sliding three spots from last year and ranking 30th nationwide, with an average score of 1078, down from 1091 in 2022.6
- Spending is up while performance is down. Pennsylvania, at a historic \$23,061 in state perstudent spending, ranks seventh-highest in the nation, but student performance remains below prepandemic levels.
 - The most recent PSSA scores show that more than half of the state's fourth graders and nearly 75 percent of its eighth graders cannot perform math at grade level, clear evidence that Pennsylvania students have not recovered from COVID-19 school closures.8
- Dozens of states outperform Pennsylvania: 19 have larger class sizes, 20 serve more English language learners, seventeen serve student populations where 15 percent or more have disabilities, and 12 serve student populations where 15 percent or more live in poverty.9
- Pennsylvania can again become a leader in education by passing PASS/Lifeline Scholarship legislation and joining the ranks of other states that allow funds to follow students to their school of choice.
 - Both program initiatives, PASS and Lifeline Scholarships, would allow funding to follow the student through an Education Spending Account (ESA), similar to a 529 college and career savings program.
 - ESAs are restricted-use spending accounts funded with state tax dollars. The funds must be for "qualified education expenses," which include tuition, school-related fees, and special education services fees associated with attendance at a non-public school.
 - Educational choice programs are growing in popularity across the United States. Nationwide, one in five students lives in a state with universal or near-universal school choice. 10
 - Thirty-five states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico fund at least one program allowing students to attend non-public schools, with many states offering two or more choice programs.

- Eighteen states, including Pennsylvania, offer 22 tax credit scholarship programs. There are eight additional tax credit programs in seven states offering individual credits or deductions.
- There are twenty-one ESA programs in 18 states.
- There are twenty-four voucher programs in 15 states. 11

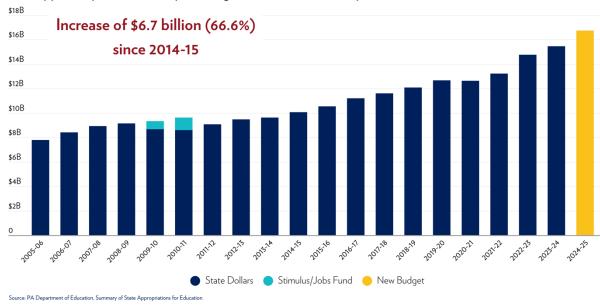
EDUCATION SPENDING

MYTH: Public schools remain underfunded.

FACT: Pennsylvania state taxpayer support of public schools is at an all-time high of \$16.8 billion in 2024–25.12

State Support of Public Schools

State support of public schools (excluding local and federal funds) reached \$16.8 billion for 2024-25.



- Public school spending has reached an all-time high. Pennsylvania public school districts receive more than \$23,000 per student from state, federal, and local sources.
 - Public education is the second-largest expense for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, with education spending increasing by 67 percent over the last decade.
 - Total public school revenues from all sources (state, local, and federal) reached \$38.6 billion as of 2023–24, an increase of 48.4 percent since 2013.
 - Despite \$4.1 billion in education funding increases over the last four years, Pennsylvania Public Schools did not rank in the top 10 for any category on the 2024 Nation's Report Card. 13
- School districts hold excessive reserve funds. Public school districts are stockpiling taxpayer dollars, holding over \$7.3 billion in general reserve funds.
 - There are 20 districts with reserve fund balances greater than 50 percent of their operating costs.

 Despite excessive reserve fund balances and historic funding from the state, many local school districts continue to raise taxes rather than spend their reserve funds.

MYTH: Governor Shapiro supports school choice.

FACT: Governor Shapiro has failed to deliver on school choice.

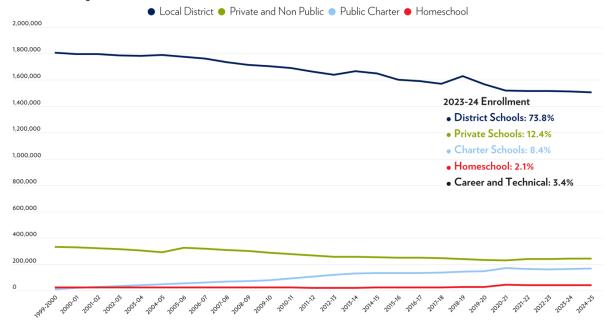
Despite campaigning on school choice, Gov. Josh Shapiro has failed to deliver on his promises. In 2022, Shapiro ran for governor on a platform that included support for Lifeline Scholarships. The state Senate passed the Lifeline Scholarship Program, codified as the Pennsylvania Award for Student Success (PASS), multiple times during the 2023–24 session. However, Shapiro, despite repeated endorsements and referring to it as "unfinished business," vetoed the program from the 2023–24 budget, and he did not stop the House from excluding it in the 2024–25 budget deal. Thousands of students remain trapped in failing schools—kids this program could have helped.

MYTH: Pennsylvania voters do not want school choice.

FACT: Polling shows broad support for expanding school choice including PASS/Lifeline Scholarships.

- Pennsylvania families want and need more options beyond the traditional public school setting. March polling shows seven out of ten Pennsylvanians support school choice. Roughly the same amount support PASS/Lifeline Scholarship legislation, which would provide low- and middleincome students with the funding they need to attend a school of their choice. 14
- Nearly 30 percent of Pennsylvania's K-12 students already exercise school choice. More than 500,000 students receive their education outside of their district-assigned school:
 - There are 252,000 attending private/non-public schools.
 - The charter school student population is 169,000.
 - More than 68,000 attend a career/technical school.
 - And 42,000 receive homeschooling.

Pennsylvania PreK-12 School Enrollment Trends



MYTH: PASS/Lifeline Scholarship legislation would take money away from public education. FACT: PASS/Lifeline Scholarship funding would not impact school district funding. 15

- The PASS/Lifeline Scholarship legislation would create a newly appropriated state fund, separate from existing public education funds, that would have no impact on funding for public schools.
 - In an August 2023 interview, Shapiro referred to PASS/Lifeline Scholarships as an "additive" program that "doesn't take anything away from public schools."
 - For every \$100 million appropriated or transferred into the Treasury for PASS/Lifeline Scholarships, approximately 13,000 students would be able to afford tuition at a school that meets their needs better than their assigned low-achieving public school.
 - There are more than 1.7 million children attending Pennsylvania's K-12 public schools.
 - Fewer than 15 percent (211,000) would be PASS/Lifeline Scholarship eligible.
- School districts would continue to retain funding, even for students who leave under the benefits of PASS/Lifeline Scholarships.
 - Just as districts do not lose funding when students move or unenroll to attend a private or homeschool, districts would not lose money when students exit the public school system, using a PASS/Lifeline Scholarship.
 - Students who choose to remain in district schools would benefit from annual per-pupil funding increases, smaller class sizes, and improved access to resources.

MYTH: The PASS/Lifeline Scholarships of \$5,000 and \$10,000 would not be enough to help poor kids afford private school.

FACT: The average private school tuition in Pennsylvania is less than \$12,200.

- PASS/Lifeline Scholarships would make private school tuition affordable. The average tuition among all private schools in Pennsylvania is \$12,170.16 However, many private schools serving lowincome students provide tuition assistance to families, which keeps tuition within \$5,000 to \$10,000 annually.
 - Some worthy examples include Mother Teresa Academy in Erie, the Neighborhood Academy in Pittsburgh, the Independence Mission Schools in Philadelphia, Kings Academy in Reading, Bishop McCourt in Johnstown, and many others.
- Private schools already serve low-income families. There are 715 private schools in Pennsylvania serving low-income students. 17 For 269 of these schools, 50 to 100 percent of their students are low-income.
- PASS/Lifeline Scholarships would target tuition assistance to low-income students. Students eligible for a scholarship must have an annual household income below 250 percent of the federal poverty level, or no greater than \$80,375 for a family of four. 18
- Students currently enrolled in a low-achieving public school would be able to choose a different school than the one assigned to them based on their zip code.
- Pennsylvania's EITC and OSTC programs provide modest tuition scholarships yet have extensive waiting lists.
 - In the 2022–23 school year, 85,570 students received an average scholarship award of \$2,613 for EITC and \$2,705 for OSTC. 19
 - The demand for tax credit scholarships always exceeds the supply. Nearly half of all applicants are turned away due to funding shortages from caps, with many of the remaining scholarships distributed via lottery.
 - According to Simple Tuition Solutions, the average annual household income for tax credit scholarship recipients is \$41,000 to \$73,000.20
 - This is consistent with findings from the Independent Fiscal Office, which in a 2022 report stated, "70 percent of [OSTC] scholarships and 77 percent of funding went to students categorized as priority." Priority households earn incomes below 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, or \$59,477 for a family of four in 2025.²¹
 - PASS/Lifeline Scholarships would help to eliminate the backlog for EITC and OSTC scholarships and provide tuition to students currently attending low-achieving public schools whose families cannot afford rent or a mortgage in a high-performing public school district.

MYTH: Charter schools cost public school districts too much money. FACT: School districts profit when kids choose to attend charter schools.

In 2023–24, Pennsylvania school districts received \$23,061 in revenue per student, including charter and cyber charter students.

- Yet, districts pay charter schools an average of \$14,774 per student, keeping \$8,287 for each charter student educated at a non-district charter school.²² Districts typically claim this is to cover transportation costs, but cyber charter schools cost districts \$0 in transportation.
- Pennsylvania should fund students, not schools. If funding were to follow students directly to the school of their choice (rather than from the state, to the district, then to the charter school), districts would not need to pay charter tuition.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

MYTH: Tax credit scholarships serve mostly white and wealthy students.

FACT: Existing school choice programs serve a population that is more racially diverse than the general population of Pennsylvania; expanding school choice will provide more options for additional low-income families.

- EITC and OSTC tax credit scholarship programs serve families with incomes between \$41,463 and \$72,895 per year, well below the U.S. Census Bureau's median income level of \$93,029 for Pennsylvania residents.
- EITC scholarships awarded within the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's K–8 schools serve a population that is more racially diverse than the general population of Pennsylvania, or the five-county Philadelphia region.
- Nearly five out of ten (47 percent) of the archdiocese's K-8 students identify as a person of color, with the other half (52 percent) identifying as White.²³

MYTH: The Commonwealth Court ordered \$4.6 billion in equitable funding for public schools. Diverting funding to PASS/Lifeline Scholarships means continuing to shortchange public schools.

FACT: The 2023 court ruling stated that lawmakers should work to ensure "every student receives a meaningful opportunity to succeed."24

- The court ruling did not order any specific measures or solutions to make education funding more equitable. The "\$4.6 billion in equitable funding" was from a "shortfall" estimate commissioned by special interest lobbyists and submitted by the plaintiffs, citing a 2007 Pennsylvania Board of Education costing-out study. Judge Renée Cohn Jubelirer explicitly guestioned the study's "current relevance," stating she was "not convinced" by the 18-year-old numbers in this study. 25
- Enacting PASS/Lifeline Scholarship legislation would help fulfill the court's mandate, since the program would serve students in the lowest-performing public schools. Pennsylvania's most vulnerable students do not have a meaningful opportunity to succeed if the only option available is a perpetually underperforming school determined by their zip code.

MYTH: School vouchers lead to segregation.

FACT: Segregation by mortgage is the most common form of segregation in Pennsylvania.

 Low-income families are priced out of high-performing public school districts. Wealthy families can afford homes in high-performing school districts, with many choosing a home based on proximity to a top-rated public school.

- Low-income families tend to live in low-achieving public school districts. School district attendance boundaries are drawn on federal maps (referred to as "redlining policies") from the 1930s that were designed to segregate based on race, ethnicity, and economic mobility. 26 Nearly 100 years later, these maps keep disadvantaged students trapped in schools assigned by address.
 - NAEP results show Pennsylvania public schools have made no measurable improvement since 2003 to close achievement gaps of more than 25 points for Black and Hispanic students, Economically Disadvantaged students, or English Language Learners.
- School choice programs reduce segregation and increase racial and ethnic diversity in the classroom.27
- PASS/Lifeline Scholarships would provide economic mobility by allowing families to choose a school, rather than forcing them to attend a school based on where they can afford to live.

MYTH: Private and religious schools deny enrollment to special education students. FACT: PASS/Lifeline Scholarships would enable families to choose a school that best serves their child's needs and circumstances.

- Private schools can and do educate public school students using Pennsylvania tax dollars. When a school district cannot meet a student's special education needs, federal, state, and district funding provide tuition scholarships for special education students to attend private schools.
- Right-to-Know (RTK) data for the 2023–24 school year shows that the Philadelphia school district spent \$35,294,572 to educate 681 students at 56 non-district schools, including 45 private schools and 11 schools operated by intermediate units (IU).²⁸
 - Many private schools already serve students who require an individualized education program, and hundreds more exist to serve special populations.
- PASS/Lifeline Scholarships would allow families to choose the best school for their child without delay and without permission from the public school district.
 - Families lose precious time when high-need, special education students—the very children who most need an individualized approach to education—languish in district classrooms that are illequipped to meet their disabilities, while they wait to have their child's case evaluated.
- Families must traverse an arduous, time-consuming, and often expensive Equitable Participation process before the district will allow their child to attend a private school that meets the student's special education needs.²⁹
- This process is expensive for families and the school district as both sides utilize lawyers to determine the best educational environment for each special education student.

MYTH: Private and religious schools are allowed to discriminate against and refuse to enroll students for any reason, including disability, race, socio-economic status, or sexual orientation. FACT: PASS/Lifeline Scholarships would provide students the opportunity to find a school that meets their needs, regardless of ability, race, socio-economic status, or sexual orientation.

PASS/Lifeline Scholarships would enable students to attend a school that meets their needs. Public schools refuse to enroll students outside of the geographic boundary of the school district,

limiting educational opportunity for students living in the catchment area of a low-achieving public school.30

Pennsylvania offers a diverse array of over 2,000 private schools that align with the values of Pennsylvania families. From schools for the Amish, Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Quaker faiths, to LGBTQ+ friendly, secular, and schools serving special education students, Pennsylvania private schools offer something for everyone. PASS/Lifeline Scholarships would put these schools within reach of Pennsylvania's at-risk children.

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