



POLICIES FOR A FLOURISHING GEORGIA School Choice

Georgia Center for Opportunity (GCO) is an independent, non-partisan think tank dedicated to increasing opportunity and improving the quality of life for all Georgians. Our mission is to make Georgia the national leader in creating opportunities for a quality education, stable employment, and healthy family life. Our vision is for Georgia's communities to be the most vibrant in the country. We believe everyone should have the chance to succeed through talent and hard work, regardless of the circumstances of their birth. GCO researches and develops solutions that address barriers to opportunity, promotes solutions to policymakers and the public, and helps innovative social enterprises deliver results on the ground.

QUALITY EDUCATION

Georgia's children are full of potential and promise, but too many are stuck in failing schools. While well-intentioned and necessary, public school reforms take years to address students' needs. Those are years students do not have to wait. They need access to a quality education now, and school choice is a key to providing immediate access. That's why the Georgia Center for Opportunity advocates for robust school choice programs that empower parents to quickly access the education that will work best for their kids.

THE PROBLEM

While opponents of school choice will often argue the need for more school funding, they ignore the fact that Georgia's education spending has more than doubled in the past forty years in inflation-adjusted dollars, most of which has gone to non-teaching staff positions.¹ As a result, per-pupil spending and teacher pay are among the highest in the Southeast region.² However, the results of such an investment have been meager, with the Peach State consistently placing at the bottom of national rankings for educational performance.

The current state of Georgia's educational system:

- In 2017, 104 schools were on Georgia's "Turnaround Eligible" list with a 3-year CCRPI average score below 54; an additional 200 schools had an average score of 60 or less.³

¹ <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2017/05/19/public-school-hiring-increases-far-outstrip-increases-in-student-enrollment-study.html>

² <http://www.governing.com/gov-data/education-data/state-education-spending-per-pupil-data.html>

³ <https://gosa.georgia.gov/turnaround-eligible-schools-list>

- In 2015, 65 percent of fourth graders and 70 percent of eighth graders were below proficiency in reading and math.^{4, 5}
- Nearly 20 percent of young adults age 20 to 24 are neither enrolled in school nor working.
- US News and World Report ranks Georgia 35th nationally in K-12 education.⁶

THE SOLUTION

Reforming our public schools must continue to be a focus of our state’s efforts to improve student achievement. Importantly, school choice offers immediate access to a better education for many students, while also creating incentives for public schools to improve and compete for students by offering a better education. While Georgia currently has start-up charter schools and two private school choice programs (tax credit and special needs scholarships), each of these options are very limited, reaching roughly 5 percent of current public-school students.⁷

To offer meaningful school choice and provide alternatives, more options are needed.⁸

To our south, the state of Florida offers private school options to more than 140,000 students each year through a mix of Education Savings Accounts, tax credit and special needs scholarships, and a vehicle sales tax scholarship.⁹ Georgia currently only has private school options available to 30,000 out of 1.8 million students and demand for these programs each year far outstrips the supply.

State leaders should consider the following to create more school choice in Georgia: ¹⁰

- Expand the tax credit scholarship program to reach a minimum of 100,000 students
- Establish Education Savings Accounts (ESAs)¹¹ to allow parents to direct the education spending for their children
- Fund charter schools equally with similarly situated traditional public schools

⁴ “High School Graduation Rates by State,” *Governing* (accessed April 5, 2017)

⁵ “High School Graduation Rates by State,” *Governing* (accessed April 5, 2017)

⁶ <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings/education>

⁷ See our *School Choice Handbook* for current school choice options in Georgia.

⁸ For research on the impact of school choice on school districts (concluding that it either helps or does no harm to school districts), see

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/The-Fiscal-Effects-of-School-Choice-Programs.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/state/florida/>

¹⁰ More about these options can be found on our website at <https://georgiaopportunity.org/education/school-choice/>

¹¹ More on ESAs can also be found at our website at <https://georgiaopportunity.org/esa/>