

12/9/2022

## Rural Public School Systems Aren't Threatened by Choices, Study Says

By J.D. Tuccille



With education choice gaining popularity across the country, given a huge boost by public schools' massive face-plant during the COVID-19 pandemic, its opponents have switched-up their tactics. They might concede people want options for their kids, but they argue that it's often unjust or impractical to allow people to redirect funding and resources from government institutions to alternatives that families prefer. Among those exceptions, they insist, are rural areas where choice does more harm than good.

But research says that school choice works just fine well outside city limits, no matter what critics claim.

"School choice is really complicated in rural areas not only because of the distance and financial constraints that many rural families have, but also because rural schools tend to function as anchors in their communities," Karen Eppley of the Pennsylvania State University College of Education told *The Atlantic's* Hayley Glatter in 2017. "Because so many families are so heavily involved in their community schools and have these social ties, the decision to withdraw their children and take them elsewhere—whether to a charter or a private school—has effects beyond just the daily school attendance."

Public schools already had declining reputations in 2017 and were losing students to alternatives. But after Eppley spoke to *The Atlantic*, COVID-19 came roaring in, and so did efforts—often fumbled—to educate children at a distance while schools closed their doors for weeks or months at a time. Many public schools completely dropped the ball, alienating students and parents with unpredictable closures. Worse, learning suffered and test scores plummeted.

"The national average score declines in mathematics for fourth- and eighth-graders were the largest ever recorded in that subject," conceded the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in October of this year.

But private and charter schools had greater flexibility

in their responses than government-run schools and were better able to respond to families' preferences. Unsurprisingly, school choice got a boost.

"The concept of school choice enjoys overwhelming support (72 percent vs. 18 percent opposed)," RealClear Opinion Research reported last summer. "This represents sizable increases in school choice support since the pandemic began."

And yet doubters still beat the same drum, with a *Dallas Morning News* columnist insisting as recently as May of this year that "rural folks know school choice will come at their expense."

That's just not true.

"Families in rural Florida, like families everywhere, are choosing learning options other than district schools," according to [Rerouting the Myths of Rural Education Choice](#), a report by Ron Matus and Dava Hankerson of Step Up for Students, a Florida nonprofit. "In 2021-22, 16.7 percent of students in Florida's 30 rural counties attended something other than a district school, whether a private school, charter school, or home education. That's up from 10.6 percent a decade prior."

As it turns out, many rural families had access to education alternatives even before the recent boom in demand. A full 69 percent of rural families lived within ten miles of private schools, in addition to charters and choices among district schools, according to a 2017 Brookings Institution report.

Supply increased to meet demand, especially when fueled by portable funding such as vouchers and education savings accounts. Matus and Hankerson point out that the number of private schools in rural Florida almost doubled from 69 to 120 between 2001 and 2021.

In fact, choice overall is popular. From 2011 to 2021, the percentage of rural Florida students in charter schools rose from 1.9 percent to 3.4 percent, the percentage in private schools increased from 4.5 percent to 6.9 percent, and the percentage homeschooled went from 4.3 percent to 6.4 percent.

But that still leaves 83.3 percent of students in traditional public schools. That's down from 89.4 percent in 2011, which is certainly a decline, but not a catastrophic one that poses an existential threat to government institutions. Choice has expanded options for families that want something different without doing significant harm to rural Florida's traditional public schools.

"Like so many other myths about school choice—that it destroys traditional public schools, that it doesn't lead to better academic outcomes, that it lacks accountability—the

myth about school choice not working in rural areas doesn't stand up to scrutiny," wrote Mancus and Hankerson.

Traditional district schools may be holding their own because they're forced to compete. Step Up for Students [separately reports](#) that "Florida's expansion of choice coincides with rising student achievement." That's evidence that all of the options are stepping up their game to attract students in a marketplace of education alternatives.

Anecdotally, as a rural dweller, I'll add that competition has benefited local families. Despite a relatively sparse population, Arizona's Verde Valley features secular private schools, religious schools, charter schools, and homeschooling in an environment supporting choice. Even before the pandemic, public-school districts felt the need to compete. One launched a preparatory academy in an attempt to attract students who might otherwise go elsewhere. The result has been a proliferation of options and general improvement in education in a rural setting much like those studied in the Florida report.

Recent innovations have made options even more accessible. While charter and private schools require

people, capital and buildings, and homeschooling is impractical for many families, microschoools split the difference with group settings that aren't resource-intensive.

"Some microschoools are run out of homes. Others build their own facilities. Shared space can often be rented from churches—which tend to remain vacant during the week—at a very low rate," advises Microschool Revolution, which connects school founders with funding.

Bridging the gap between family-based education and standalone schools, microschoools offer a flexible approach for specialized student populations and sparsely populated rural areas alike.

So, once again critics of school choice are wrong. Expanding options empowers families to pick the approaches that are right for their kids, does so without destroying government institutions, and may well improve the quality of learning alternatives that have to compete for students. In education as in other areas of life, choice is a good thing for country folk, city dwellers, and everybody in between.