

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO

# School Choice



Charter Schools





Choosing where to send your child to school is one of the biggest decisions you can make as a parent. But for many families, making sense of different education options can be confusing. Public schools, public charter schools, magnet schools, private schools, homeschooling—what does it all mean, and how do you know where to start?

At BASIS Charter Schools, we believe school choice is an essential tool in helping students unlock their full potential. A school’s curriculum, culture, teachers, and staff can all have a significant effect on student outcomes.

We created this guide with the goal of helping parents make informed decisions for their family. Learn about the history of school choice, how different types of schools compare to one another, and what to keep in mind when considering potential schools.



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# WHAT IS SCHOOL CHOICE?

When you move to a new neighborhood, your child will automatically be assigned to a public school district—but that doesn't mean it's your only option for education. You could choose instead to enroll your child in a different public school, a public charter school, or a private school. You could even homeschool your child.

The freedom for parents to choose the school that best suits their child is referred to as **school choice**. All 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia have some degree of protection for parents' right to school choice.

## ● SCHOOL CHOICE HAS GROWN CONSIDERABLY IN RECENT DECADES

The rise of school choice can be traced back to 1955, when Milton Freidman proposed incorporating free-market principles to education. Specifically, he introduced the idea of a school voucher program that would cover a portion of private school tuition.

Although Freidman is credited with putting the idea of school choice into motion, it wasn't until the 1990s that modern school choice initiatives were enacted. Since then, there have been major strides made in this space.

- 1990** Private school vouchers are established in Milwaukee, Wisconsin<sup>1</sup>
- 1992** The nation's first public charter school opens in St. Paul, Minnesota<sup>2</sup>
- 1993** California creates a District of Choice program, allowing students to enroll in public schools outside of district lines<sup>3</sup>
- 2004** Congress passes the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, providing private school scholarships to low-income students<sup>4</sup>
- 2011** 12 states pass legislation to create new school choice programs or expand existing programs<sup>5</sup>
- 2021** Following pandemic shutdowns and disruptions, 18 states launch new school choice programs or expand existing programs<sup>6</sup>

BASIS Charter Schools started in Arizona, a state with a long history of school choice initiatives. Arizona's first charter school opened in 1995. Today, there are over [500 public charter schools in the state](#).

## HOW POPULAR IS SCHOOL CHOICE?

The practice of enrolling children in a school other than their assigned public school is continuing to gain popularity. Data from [EdChoice](#) reveals that the number of education savings accounts, school vouchers, and tax-credit scholarships currently in use is higher than ever before. This indicates that more and more parents are choosing to send their children to schools of choice, and that states are implementing programs to assist parents with education expenses.

According to the latest data from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), more than one quarter of all U.S. children are enrolled in a school other than their assigned public school. Approximately 17% of U.S. students grades 1–12 are enrolled in a chosen public school and 9% are enrolled in a private school.

## GUIDELINES AND LAWS VARY FROM STATE TO STATE

School choice laws are different in each state. Although there have been widespread pushes to make school choice more accessible, some states provide parents with more options than others.

For example, some states have programs that assist families with private school tuition or provide tax credits to individuals who fund private school scholarships. Other states do not have any private school tuition assistance, but still allow students to attend public charter schools or traditional public schools outside of their assigned school district.

For a breakdown of school choice laws in your state, visit the [National School Choice Week's School Choice State Guides](#).

## ● WHY SCHOOL CHOICE IS VALUABLE TO PARENTS

Parents who are happy with their child's local public school might have a hard time understanding why school choice is necessary. However, there are numerous reasons why you might want to send your child to a different school. For instance:

- You are unhappy with the quality of education provided at your child's current school
- Your child is being bullied or harassed at their current school
- Your child has special needs that their current school is not equipped to meet
- The coursework at your child's current school is either too challenging or not challenging enough
- You would like your child to attend a school with a specialized or accelerated curriculum

School choice allows you to find a school that maximizes your child's potential, no matter where you live.

<sup>1</sup> <https://schoolchoicewi.org/about/history/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://education.mn.gov/mde/fam/cs/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-08-23-mn-27047-story.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20094050/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/school-choice-america-2011-educational-opportunity-reaches-new-heights>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.city-journal.org/school-choice-rising>



# WHAT ARE YOUR OPTIONS FOR K-12 EDUCATION?

## ● PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Public schools are funded by the government and are free for students to attend. Public school funding comes from a variety of sources, including local property taxes and federal taxes. Because public schools are government-funded, they need to follow state and federal regulations.

### Traditional public schools

Traditional public schools are the default education option for most U.S. families. School districts are assigned based on address. For many families, the quality of a neighborhood's local public school can be a significant factor in choosing where to live.

Depending on where you live, you may be able to enroll your child in a public school outside of your assigned district. This practice is known as open enrollment or interdistrict choice, and it's becoming

increasingly common. Currently, 12 states have unrestricted [open enrollment policies](#) for their public school districts. Other states only allow parents to transfer to an out-of-district public school if they meet specific requirements.

### Benefits of Public Schools

- Tuition-free
- In-district schools will be located close to home and will often provide transportation

## Public charter schools

Public charter schools are publicly funded but independently run. This unique operation model makes charter schools exempt from certain government regulations regarding curriculum, staffing, and budgeting. Compared to traditional public schools, teachers at public charter schools tend to have more autonomy over what they teach. That said, this degree of autonomy varies depending on each state's unique [public charter school laws](#).

Even though public charter schools don't need to follow all the same regulations as traditional public schools, they still have to meet strict academic standards. In fact, public charter schools are often held to higher standards than their traditional public school counterparts. This is because in addition to meeting state academic standards, public charter schools also have to meet the performance expectations of their local public charter school authorizer.

To enroll your child in a public charter school, you will need to fill out an application. Many states, including Arizona, require charter schools to use a lottery system to fill open seats if they have more applicants than they can accommodate in a given school year.

Like traditional public schools, public charter schools are tuition-free.

The BASIS Charter Schools network is dedicated to providing world-class, transformative education to K–12 students. Starting in 1998 with a single school in Tucson, Arizona, our network has expanded to 39 schools across Arizona, Louisiana, Texas, and Washington, D.C.

The BASIS Charter School Curriculum is both challenging and supportive, empowering students to achieve at globally competitive levels. Year after year, BASIS Charter Schools [rank among the best high schools in the United States](#).

### Benefits of Public Charter Schools

- Tuition-free
- Held to high academic standards
- Schools often follow an accelerated curriculum and offer a broad range of subjects

## Magnet schools

Magnet schools are public schools that specialize in a particular subject area, such as science or the arts. They commonly teach subjects that aren't often found at traditional public schools.

Magnet schools are operated by public school districts, meaning that they share the same administration and school board as traditional public schools. Some magnet schools require incoming students to have specific achievements in the school's core subject area, while other magnet schools simply use a random lottery system to accept students.

Since magnet schools are a type of public school, they are free to attend.

### Benefits of Magnet Schools

- Tuition-free
- Held to the same academic standards as traditional public schools
- Feature in-depth coursework in a particular subject area



## PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Private schools are not funded by the government. Instead, they are funded primarily through student tuition.

Since private schools are not government-funded, they do not need to follow the same rules and regulations as public schools. Administrators and teachers have the freedom to shape their school’s curriculum as they see fit. Some private schools also choose to employ unique teaching methods, such as [Montessori](#) or [Waldorf education](#).

Private schools may be either religious or secular. Unlike public schools, they are permitted to restrict applicants based on factors such as religious affiliation or academic ability.

There are a variety of ways parents can offset the cost of private school tuition. Some states have a voucher system in which parents can take the state funding that would normally be set aside for their child’s public school education and use it to pay for private school instead. Other states provide parents with an education savings account (ESA) after the parent withdraws their child from a public school. These savings accounts are publicly funded and can be used to pay for a variety of education expenses, including private school tuition. Another option is securing a private school scholarship for your child.

### Benefits of Private Schools

- Often have higher academic standards than public schools
- Smaller class sizes
- Some schools focus on specific subject areas or employ unique teaching models

## COMPARING DIFFERENT TYPES OF SCHOOLS

How do public schools and private schools compare to one another? This chart may help you visualize some of the distinctions between different types of schools.

	Traditional public schools	Public charter schools	Magnet schools	Private schools
Publicly funded	✓	✓	✓	
Privately operated		✓		✓
Tuition-free	✓	✓	✓	
Application required		✓	✓	✓
Open to anyone	✓	✓		
Uses a lottery system to accept students		✓	✓	
Adheres to state academic standards	✓	✓	✓	
Often features an accelerated or specialized curriculum		✓	✓	✓
Smaller class sizes, on average		✓	✓	✓
Legally required to provide services to children with disabilities or special needs	✓	✓	✓	
Religious preference may be expressed by teachers and staff				✓



## HOMESCHOOLING

If you're looking for an alternative form of education outside of public and private school, you may want to look into homeschooling. Homeschooled children are taught within their own homes, typically with their parents acting as teachers.

Homeschooling regulations vary greatly from state to state. Parents must report attendance and academic progress to the state, and in some cases, they may need to use an approved homeschool curriculum. Some states require homeschooled children to participate in state exams while others do not. If you're considering homeschooling your child, it's important to research your state's [homeschool laws](#).

### Benefits of Homeschooling

- Parents can often customize their child's curriculum
- Lessons can be completed on a flexible schedule
- Students are able to learn from the comfort of home





# HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT SCHOOL FOR YOUR FAMILY

There are a number of factors you'll want to consider as you research potential schools for your child. Proximity to home, test scores, and extracurricular offerings could all play a role in your decision to choose one school over another.

Unsure where to start? Here are some of our top recommendations for finding a school that ticks all your boxes.

## ● CREATE A LIST OF PRIORITIES

Before you can effectively weigh the pros and cons of different schools, you need to know what you're looking for. Every family's priorities will be different, so take some time to think about what factors matter most to you and your child.

### Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Do you need a school that's close to your home or office?
- How will you get your child to and from school?
- Are you looking for a tuition-free school? If not, what's your budget for tuition?
- Does your child require accommodations for disabilities?
- Are there any specific subject areas or extracurriculars that are important to you and your child?

Create a list of qualities that are important to your family and keep these in mind as you start researching schools in your area. As you learn about different schools, you may discover additional preferences you didn't realize you had. Keep a running list of the school qualities that interest you and use this to guide your search.

## ● VISIT SCHOOLS IN YOUR AREA

Visiting a school in person can give you a feel for what your child's day-to-day learning environment will be like. This is also a great time to ask any questions you might have.

Many schools offer tours for prospective parents. If you can't find details on [tours and information sessions](#) on a school's website, call or email them to see what your options are for visiting the school.

During a school tour, a staff member will show you around different parts of the campus. They will likely provide an overview of the school's history, mission, and curriculum. You may even be able to drop in on a classroom or two while school is in session.

[Find out what to expect when you tour a BASIS Charter School.](#)

## ● TALK TO OTHER PARENTS

Connecting with fellow parents during your school search allows you to learn from their perspectives. Ask around in your community and see if any of your friends or neighbors have children who are attending your top school choices. You might also turn to online forums or social media to find real reviews of the school from parents whose children are enrolled.

[Click here](#) to watch a video interview from a BASIS Charter School parent of three.



## ● ASK QUESTIONS

Whether in person, on the phone, or via email, asking questions is an essential step in finding the right school for your child.

A few questions you might want to ask when researching a school include:

- When does your school year begin and end?
- Do you provide transportation to and from school?
- Do you offer any before- or after-school programs?
- Do you provide lunch to students?
- How does the curriculum compare to that of other area schools?
- Is the curriculum considered advanced?
- What types of extracurricular activities are offered?
- What kind of student support programs do you offer?
- How do faculty and staff ensure a safe learning environment for children?
- What are your educational requirements for teachers?
- What is your average class size and what is your student-to-teacher ratio?
- How do your school's average standardized test scores compare to other schools?
- What is the process of enrolling my child in your school?
- If the number of applications received exceeds available spots, how are students selected?
- Will I have to pay tuition?

For high schools, you may also want to ask about college counseling and the school's average graduation rate.



## LEARN MORE ABOUT BASIS CHARTER SCHOOLS

As you explore education options, keep in mind that every family and every child is unique. While rankings and reviews can be incredibly helpful research tools, it's also important to follow your instinct and choose a school that you and your child are genuinely excited about.

One of our goals at BASIS Ed and the BASIS Charter Schools network is to help students develop a love of learning and a desire to excel. We set students up for academic success with our accelerated STEM-infused, liberal arts curriculum.

Learn more about our network of tuition-free, public charter schools by [visiting our website](#). From there, you can [find a school near you](#), sign up for our newsletter, and [schedule a school tour](#). We can't wait to show you what BASIS Charter Schools have to offer.