

# iiiIssues

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*Public Schools* are failing America's children  
everyday

*American Students* are routinely outper-  
formed by students from economically less-  
affluent countries in general knowledge tests

*Muslims in America* have ranked school  
choice as their top political priority in polls

*School Choice Policies* will empower  
parents across the nation to choose alterna-  
tives to local public schools

## School Choice Works in America

Many examples of the success of school choice programs can be found in America. For example, of charter school students who were failing in previous schools, 56.3% now report that their performance is "good" or "excellent," according to a study by the Hudson Institute. In Milwaukee, a bastion of the school choice movement, a 1997 survey of the Parents Advancing Value Education (PAVE) scholarship program found that 75% of PAVE's scholarship graduates--all low-income, at-risk students--are continuing their education in college or technical schools.

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## *School Choice for America's Future*

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The Islamic Society of North America recently published an open letter to public school administrators, seeking religious tolerance for Muslim students across America. For some Muslim students, however, tolerance in the classroom is already the rule. The reason? School choice.

In Milwaukee, more than sixty students will use school choice vouchers to attend the private Clara Muhammad School this fall. In Illinois, Muslim parents who send their children to private schools — even religious ones like the Islamic Foundation School — can be assisted by a school choice tax credit that lets families recoup up to \$500 for money spent on tuition. In Pennsylvania, the thirty Muslim students attending the Western Pennsylvania Cyber-Charter School will be able to study Arabic through an online learning program with the Arabic Academy of Cairo.

Those are just a few examples of the way school choice policies are empowering Muslim parents across the nation to choose alternatives to the local public school. Whether in the form of vouchers, tuition tax credits, or charter schools, some education reforms have begun to decentralize our public school system that, for too long, has worked more like Soviet economies than the American free market.

Parents of all backgrounds are responding favorably to choice in education. A CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll found that 54 percent of parents would send their child to a private school if they could afford it. Within the Islamic community, support for choice is even greater. A recent study conducted by the American Muslim Council found that American Muslims ranked school choice as their top political priority. A similar poll found that 84 percent of Muslims support school choice.

One likely reason for this strong support is that school choice helps parents ensure that their child's education is consistent with their values. Public schools often become battlegrounds for cultural issues such as prayer or sex education because of their "one size fits all" structure. School choice lets parents select the best education option for their child, rather than fighting public school bureaucrats over controversial policies.

Critics' attacks on school choice, which often center on the ability of parents to choose religious schools, do not stand up to scrutiny. Some charge that enabling attendance at religious schools violates the First Amendment of the Constitution, yet the Supreme Court has upheld numerous government programs that provide funding to religious institutions. A child can use federal dollars to receive daycare services at a local church; years later use a federal Pell Grant to attend Notre Dame University; and, during the final years of his life, spend thousands of Medicare dollars for treatment at St. Peter's Hospital. Should the K-12 years be any different?

But school choice won't just help religious families; it will help all of the 50 million students in American schools. By returning control to parents, school choice can create genuine accountability. Parents will have the freedom to demand excellence from their school, or send their children elsewhere. The same incentives that make market economies efficient will benefit education. Under school

choice, good schools will flourish, and other providers will imitate their successes. Bad schools will be forced to change, as their students head elsewhere.

Evidence from existing school choice programs supports the theory that education results improve when parents are empowered with choice. Harvard University recently released a survey of parents whose children received private scholarships to attend the school of their choice. Roughly seventy percent of the parents interviewed were very satisfied with the values, safety, and academic quality of their child's school. Only one in five public school parents expressed similar satisfaction. Overall, more than a dozen studies have found that school choice policies increase parental involvement and have a positive impact on student achievement.

For thirty years, lawmakers have tried to reform education by raising teacher salaries and reducing class sizes in public schools, but student achievement has continued to decline. It's time for a new approach. Lawmakers should pursue school choice policies that empower parents with the freedom to choose the best education for their children and impose the long-overdue market discipline on a failing monopoly. It's right for Islamic families and all others who seek a quality education for their children.

For more information on the Cato Institute's education project, visit [www.cato.org](http://www.cato.org)

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