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Summary:

National School Choice Week celebrates opportunity in K-12 education and shows how school choice brings quality education to millions of children. Oregon education policies should support expanding options for all families, so students can learn in the ways that are most successful for them.

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“Oregon education policies should value all options that empower students, and parents should be free to choose among them.”

Oregon Should Expand Education Choices to Help All Students Succeed

By Kathryn Hickok

Oregon students are now half-way through their third school year since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Here in Oregon and around the country, families have struggled to keep their children engaged with their education, under difficult circumstances. As Oregon moves forward, now is the time to put more choices in the hands of parents so children can learn in the ways that work best for them.

During the pandemic school closures, many parents tried new schools, resources, and education approaches. In the process, they discovered fresh perspectives on how their children learn best and what would support them most successfully. These experiences are motivating parents to advocate for increased options in K-12 education.

January 23-29 is [National School Choice Week](#), a nonpolitical and nonpartisan celebration of effective education options. Every January, participants plan tens of thousands of independent events and activities—such as school fairs, open houses, and student showcases—to raise awareness about school choice across all 50 states. It’s the world’s largest celebration of opportunity in K-12 education, drawing attention to the ways in which school choice has brought quality education to millions of children.

As a nonprofit effort, National School Choice Week focuses inclusively on traditional public, charter, magnet, online, private, and home education options. School Choice Week also provides free, practical resources year-round to assist families searching for schools that may be a good fit for their children. Resources specific to Oregon, and events that will be held around our state, are included on National School Choice Week’s website at schoolchoiceweek.com/guide-school-choice-oregon.

As director of the Children’s Scholarship Fund-Oregon program—which has provided \$3.5 million in elementary scholarships to low-income children—I’ve watched how school choice sparks students’ enthusiasm for learning. More options give parents the ability to make sure their children can learn in schools that address their needs, talents, and goals. Finding the right school gives children the chance to fulfill their potential. That’s why I support school choice and National School Choice Week.

(cont’d)



Long before the pandemic, the landscape of options for Oregon K-12 students was diverse and growing. Families were choosing private and parochial schools, public charter schools (including online schools), homeschooling, magnet schools, and more. Oregon was an early adopter of public charter school legislation, and almost 36,000 Oregon students attend 131 charter schools today.

Since COVID-19, new types of learning environments have become household words, like microschoools, learning pods, and hybrid education. The technological advances of the past few decades have made available to parents an almost unlimited array of curriculum resources and instructional aids. It has never been easier to homeschool, to supplement public district offerings with web-based courses, or to combine in-classroom time with home learning.

During the past two years, increasing numbers of parents have “voted with their feet” for school choice. Since the COVID pandemic began, 8.7 million children switched from public to private schools nationwide. Charter school enrollment in Oregon increased 20.8% between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years. The number of Oregon homeschooled students increased 73% between the last two school years. According to the U.S. Census, 11.1% of American households with school-aged children report they are now homeschooling, double the percentage before the pandemic.

As these enrollment shifts have taken place, broad-based public support of parental choice has also increased. Seven state legislatures passed new school choice laws last year, and 14 states expanded 21 existing programs. West Virginia recently enacted the broadest K-12 Education Savings Account program in the country, accessible to almost all children in the state.

Oregon education policies should value all options that empower students, and parents should be free to choose among them. I hope Oregon will join this wave of support for education choice and expand families’ opportunities. Lawmakers can do this in many ways, for example: lifting the cap on charter school enrollment; making it easier for high schoolers to demonstrate graduation-level proficiency through the GED test; and letting education funding follow the child, thus funding students rather than systems.

Expanding opportunities for families is the education innovation whose time has come. As Oregon recovers from the pandemic, we can serve all students better through school choice.

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