

EXPLORING SCHOOL CHOICE OPTIONS



When you do the math, children spend up to 16,000 hours of their life in school.

And, if your current school doesn't align with your family's values and goals, 16,000 hours seems like a lot of wasted time. Finding alternatives to increasingly-politicized government school systems can feel intimidating, but it's paramount that parents guide the education of our children. This checklist serves as an overview for navigating school choice options available to all of us—including homeschooling, charter schools, and voucher programs. Ready? Let's get started...



1.

CHECK YOUR STATE'S SCHOOL CHOICE OPTIONS

State laws and policies determine what school choice options are available to you, as every state is different. Here's how to start educating yourself about options in your area.

LEARN YOUR STATE'S LAWS

- **State Education Website:** Visit your state's Department of Education website to get an overview of school choice programs available in your state.
- **Legislative Resources:** Websites for the state legislature (sometimes called the General Assembly and typically consisting of a state's Senate and House of Representatives) often maintain a database of current and past education bills, which can paint a picture of your state's legal landscape around school choice.
- **National School Choice Week:** The National School Choice Week website has a state-by-state map that summarizes each state's options: <https://schoolchoiceweek.com/state-guides/>

RESEARCH VOUCHERS, ESAS, AND TAX CREDITS

- **Voucher Programs:** Some states offer vouchers to students who meet certain criteria, allowing them to attend private schools at reduced or no cost.
- **Educational Savings Accounts (ESAs):** These are available in some states, letting you use public funds for approved educational expenses, including private school tuition.
- **Tax-Credit Scholarships:** Some states offer tax credits to individuals and businesses donating to scholarship funds, which are distributed to qualifying families.
- **National School Choice Week:** The National School Choice Week website has a state-by-state map that summarizes each state's options: <https://schoolchoiceweek.com/state-guides/>

BE MINDFUL OF HOMESCHOOL REGULATIONS

- **State Guidelines:** Homeschooling laws differ from one state to another. Some states require you to notify your local school district, follow a set curriculum, or even have your child take standardized tests.
- **Homeschooling Associations:** State-specific homeschooling associations provide resources and legal guidance—from avoiding truancy penalties to establishing/naming your homeschool and more. Find guidance at the Homeschool Legal Defense Association (HSLDA.org).

2.

ASSESS YOUR NEEDS

- **Identify Educational Goals:** What do you hope your child will gain from their education?
- **Evaluate Current School:** Determine what you like and dislike about your child's educational setting. Does it fulfill your educational goals?
- **Philosophy, Worldview, and Values:** Beyond the academics and extracurricular programs, a school's underlying philosophy, worldview, and values are of utmost importance. Does your current school's philosophy, worldview, and values match those of your family? This is important at the school-wide level but also the classroom level, too. What are the philosophy, worldview, and values of the teachers in your child's classroom?
- **Financial Considerations:** What is your budget for educational expenses? What are you willing to pay for your children to receive an education that aligns with your goals and values?

3.

CHOOSE WHAT MEETS YOUR NEEDS

Once you know what is available in your area and assess your educational goals for your family, you can make an informed decision.

CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools are public schools operated independently of the local school district, often with a specific educational philosophy.

- **Pros and Cons:** They offer more curricular freedom but may have limited resources compared to traditional public schools.
- **How to Apply:** Most states have a list of charter schools available on each state's Department of Education website. Research the schools in your area, visit them, and follow application procedures according to any lotteries, deadlines, or additional directives.

ONLINE SCHOOLS

Online schools deliver education online and allow students to attend classes from home. These can be public, charter, or private institutions.

- **Pros and Cons:** They offer high flexibility, allowing learning at one's own pace. However, they lack in-person social interactions and may require a high level of self-discipline.
- **How to Apply:** Applications are typically submitted online. Some online schools may have entrance requirements like interviews, tests, or essays.

PRIVATE & INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Private schools operate independently of public school systems and are often affiliated with religious institutions or follow specialized curricula. Unlike public schools, they are funded through tuition fees, grants, and donations.

- **Pros and Cons:** Private schools often offer smaller class sizes and specialized programs but come with a financial burden of tuition and additional donation requirements. Many align with specific religious or educational philosophies and provide a values-based education. Make sure to check for school accreditation notables that align with your family's goals (as well as any accreditation notables that do not align with your family's goals).

- **How to Apply:** Application processes vary widely but often include an application form, interviews, and possibly entrance exams. Be sure to ask private schools if financial aid or scholarships are available.

- **Voucher Programs:** Some states offer vouchers that can be used to offset the cost of private school tuition.

HOMESCHOOLING

Homeschooling involves educating children at home, as determined by parents' schedules, through structured curricula or more informal learning methods.

- **Pros and Cons:** It offers the utmost flexibility and the opportunity to instill specific values in your children, as well as learn according to each child's ability and pacing. Effective homeschooling requires time, planning, and commitment from parents. Critics argue that homeschooling limits socialization, but part-time tutorials, pods, and group learning co-ops now operate in most areas.

- **How to Apply:** Requirements differ by state. You may need to submit a notice of intent to homeschool to your local school district and comply with other state-specific regulations, such as establishing a school name, curriculum standards, record keeping, or periodic evaluations.

4.

FINAL THOUGHTS

- **Visit Schools:** Always meet with potential educators and don't be shy to ask questions.
- **Waitlists and Deadlines:** Popular options fill up quickly. Be mindful of application timelines and waitlists.
- **Accreditations:** Heed private and online school accreditations that align with long-term educational goals (college requirements, school to work options, etc). For homeschooling, assess any requirements and/or directives required in your state.

Exploring school choice options empowers us to align our children's education with family values and needs. Whether through charter schools, private institutions, homeschooling, or voucher programs, we can take positive and successful control of our family's educational future.



**Find more Parent Resources
at PragerUkids.com.**