

# **Oklahoma Far Behind Other States for School Choice and Education Reform**

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## **Introduction**

Oklahoma's education outcomes rank in the bottom five of the United States. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) for 2022, only 21% of eighth graders are proficient in reading and only 16% of eighth graders are proficient in math (NCES, 2023). With 701,258 Oklahoma public school students, these numbers indicate that 483,868 Oklahoma students over a twelve-year period are wholly and sadly unprepared for the workforce.

The Oklahoma Legislature is currently debating how to best launch school choice for the people of Oklahoma. This short paper will thus compare Oklahoma's NAEP scores with two leading school choice states – Arizona and Florida. We will also address the myth that school choice leads to a decrease in K-12 public school funding with relevant evidence from Arizona and Florida. Finally, we will address the impact of school choice policy on academic performance with some insights on how state leaders should pursue education reform to better prepare Oklahoma students for the workforce.

## **Comparisons**

Oklahoma significantly lags behind the national average score for 8th-grade reading, as reported by The Nation's Report Card. Oklahoma's 2022 assessment score was 251 compared to the national average of 259. As a result, Oklahoma ranks 47<sup>th</sup> in the nation. The two states that have the longest history of school choice freedom are Arizona and Florida. By contrast, Arizona's score is 259 and Florida's score is 260, thereby ranking 30<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> respectively (NCES, 2023).

Oklahoma also significantly lags behind the national average score for 8th-grade math. Oklahoma's 2022 assessment score was 260 compared to the national average of 273. In

contrast, Arizona’s score is 271 and Florida’s score is 271 thereby ranking 33<sup>rd</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> respectively (NCES, 2023). Please see Table 1 below for a summary of the above.

<u>State</u>	<u>8th Grade Reading</u>	<u>8th Grade Math</u>
<b>Arizona</b>	259	271
<b>Florida</b>	260	271
<b>Oklahoma</b>	251	260

**Table 1: The Nations Report Card by the National Assessment of Education Progress 2022**

Although we cannot claim cause and effect regarding the impact of school choice on public school education outcomes, the education outcomes of Arizona and Florida are certainly better than those of Oklahoma. Currently, these two states are known for having the most robust school choice programs in the country. Needless to say, multiple factors and policy decisions have an impact on education outcomes, but we can assert that moving to a robust choice program for Oklahoma should not negatively affect Oklahoma outcomes. We can’t do much worse than we already are. Government-run education is clearly not up to the task of properly preparing the majority of our kids for the workforce; therefore, parents should be given control over how their education tax dollars are spent.

### **School Choice Impact on School Funding**

Many education officials have opposed school choice, from either tax credits or education savings accounts, because they believe it will reduce funding for traditional public schools. The recent political campaigns for governor and superintendent of public instruction witnessed such rhetoric as “vouchers will destroy rural schools,” and “vouchers will kill public education.”

These outbursts are similar to claims made in Florida as state leaders there implemented school choice twenty years ago. “This is the day that will go down in the annals of Florida history as the day we abandoned the public schools and the day that, more importantly, our children,” bemoaned Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz in March 1999 (Bedrick & Tarnowski, 2021).

“I think it’s an attempt to strip the public schools of the resources that they have, and the resources we have are not enough,” asserted Debra Robinson, a Palm Beach County school board member in February 2001 (Bedrick & Tarnowski, 2021). Sounds pretty familiar to what we have heard from school choice opponents in Oklahoma, but the evidence does not support the claims of naysayers that school funding will decrease if parents are given control and options for the school of choice.

In December 2021 the *Who’s Afraid of School Choice?* authors Jason Bedrick and Ed Tarnowski published findings on K-12 per-public funding in several states which have a multi-year history with school choice (Bedrick & Tarnowski, 2021). For Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin, they specifically measured the percentage change in funding from 2002 to 2019. Table 2 below provides their results.

State	2019 Per-Pupil Funding	Percent Increase In Real Per-Pupil Funding Since 2002
Arizona	\$10,314	1.20%
Florida	\$11,204	6.30%
Indiana	\$13,110	1.50%
Ohio	\$15,539	12.70%
Wisconsin	\$14,582	5.10%

**Table 2: K-12 Per—Pupil Funding (2019), Increase Since 2002.**

They conclude that the critique of school choice leading to the “defunding” of traditional public schools is false. “In the five states with the most robust educational choice policies, inflation-adjusted funding per pupil increased between 1.2% (Arizona) to 12.7 percent (Ohio) since 2002, which is not long after four of the five states enacted their first educational choice policy” (Bedrick & Tarnowski, 2021).

### **Impact on Academic Performance**

Bedrick and Tarnowski also examined the impacts of school choice policies on academic performance using data from *Education Week’s* Quality Counts K-12 Achievement Index. While the authors acknowledge that it is impossible to prove the causation of school choice leading to improved performance, it is reasonable to conclude that the negative effects claimed by school choice critics had to be negligible, even if those negative effects occurred at all.

Furthermore, four of the top five school choice states have displayed improvement in academic performance. According to *Education Week’s* Achievement Index, which employs a variety of measures, including Advance Placement (AP) test data and NAEP scores, Florida, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Arizona showed significant improvement for the period 2009 to 2021 moving up higher in the rankings of all 50 states (Bedrick & Tarnowski, 2021). Ohio was the outlier having displayed improvement, but not enough to avoid being overtaken by several states with larger gains.

Before leaving the topic of academic performance, we should note that an objective analysis of the rankings of academic performance using both NAEP scores and Education Week’s Quality Counts assessment, school choice does not appear to be the driving factor of the states that rank in the top ten of education outcomes. Neither Arizona nor Florida, the two

leading school choice states, make the top ten of either set of rankings. Arizona ranks 30<sup>th</sup> in 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading proficiency and 45<sup>th</sup> in the Quality Counts Overall Achievements Index. Florida ranks 21<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> respectively.

It goes without saying, however, that both Arizona and Florida rank significantly higher in all measures of education outcomes than Oklahoma. Oklahoma would do well to launch school choice as soon as possible.

Having said that, state leaders need to be mindful that overall education reform is more critical to the thousands of Oklahoma students that currently and will continue to attend public schools in the future. Even in vibrant school choice states, the participation rate does not exceed 6.6% (EdWeek Research Center, 2021). Simply adopting school choice and increasing public school funding will not change the abysmal outcomes of the Oklahoma public education system.

Multiple reforms such as reading proficiency programs, renewed accountability for schools and greater transparency for parents deserve consideration and adoption. The destiny of the next generation, our workforce, and our society lies in the hands of these students who must be more proficient in reading and math to have success and make Oklahoma competitive in the global economy.

## **Conclusion**

Oklahoma students need policy makers to launch significant, major changes to our education system if we are to properly prepare students for the workforce. The reading and math proficiency scores for Oklahoma 8<sup>th</sup> graders are abysmal, and lawmakers should consider broad transformative reforms with expedited urgency. Our review of the data and evidence related to school choice reform dispel the two myths about less funding and lower performance most often

used by opponents of school choice. School choice **does not** lead to decreased funding for public schools, and school choice **does not** cause a decline in overall academic performance.

The data also indicates, however, that school choice is not, in and of itself, the primary driver of reform that will lift a state to top ten in education quality and outcomes. We hope state leaders will become acutely aware of this fact and embark on a multi-year effort of multiple reforms to our defunct education system which must be remade with students, not bureaucracy, in mind.

## References

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