



# School Choice Week Returns as Demand for Options Soars

By Ben DeGrow | January 2022

The 12th and latest edition of National School Choice Week (January 23-29) arrives in Michigan at a time when demand for education options has reached an all-time high. Out of appreciation for the benefits many students and families already enjoy, state officials should work to further expand access to needed options.

Parents are on the lookout for new schools and approaches to educate their children. A survey recently released by the National School Choice Week organization found more than half of parents have actively considered selecting a new or different school within the past year. Separate polling from EdChoice's Public Opinion Tracker indicates half of Michigan parents would prefer instruction outside of a regular public school – whether by private, charter or home school.

For years, many Michigan students and their parents have cried out for educational alternatives. Families seeking relief are disproportionately from low-income, disadvantaged communities where government school systems have clearly failed. But they have been joined by families of children with

learning disabilities and chronic health conditions, those who have experienced bullying, and others just seeking more challenging learning environments.

Families with means often purchase homes in desired districts or pay full freight for private school tuition to give their children a better education. Pandemic disruptions and policies turned more families to private schooling and, in even larger numbers, to home education.

Support for further opportunities has grown over time. One in four Michigan public school students attends either a charter or a district outside his or her home boundaries. Families who exercise choice to enroll in another district tend to gravitate to schools with stronger academic performance, while parents of public charter school students give high marks to those schools.

As some school systems prolong their frustrating reactions to COVID, parents are demanding more options. Most notably, Detroit and Flint continue to delay returning their vulnerable student populations

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to needed in-person instruction, marking a third year of shutdowns.

The Legislature has repeatedly sought to look beyond the well-funded conventional system by sending education dollars directly to families to help solve their own challenges. But Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has used her veto pen to put the kibosh on all three attempts – blocking hundreds of millions of dollars designated for families looking for help to improve the lives of struggling learners.

Whitmer’s Democratic Party inadvertently put the issue back in the limelight in January with a revealing Facebook post that stirred a backlash among frustrated parents. The post belittled parent input into what children learn in public schools and said that those who don’t like it should pay for private education or deal with it. “The client of the public schools is not the parent, but the entire community, the public,” the message proclaimed before it was taken down two days later with little explanation.

The post ignores both the results of Virginia’s recent statewide elections and the plain language of Michigan law: “It is the natural, fundamental right of parents and legal guardians to determine and direct the care, teaching, and education of their children. The public schools of this state serve the needs of the pupils by cooperating with the pupil’s parents and legal guardians to develop the pupil’s intellectual capabilities and vocational skills in a safe and positive environment.”

This principled statement needs more substance to afford families across the state access to a full range of options. On one key front, the Mackinac Center continues to press its federal lawsuit to stop the state constitution from discriminating against education choices on behalf of five Michigan families. Others are going directly to the voters to resurrect the Let Kids Learn scholarship plan, which could directly help thousands of Michigan students afford a quality education that would otherwise be out of reach.

While these respective developments play out in the courts and at the ballot box, Lansing lawmakers could dip into discretionary federal COVID dollars to offer direct aid to students and families who are affected by classroom shutdowns but cannot afford needed instruction and services.

Such a proposal would inject extra life into this year’s School Choice Week celebration. It would also give the governor a fresh opportunity to show faith in parents. Now, more than ever, it’s essential we provide students the resources and options they need to succeed.

Available online at: [www.mackinac.org/v2022-03](http://www.mackinac.org/v2022-03)



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