



LEGISLATIVE BRIEF

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Expanding Educational Choice in Maryland: Evaluating the BOOST Program and Pathways for Growth

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Maryland Lawmakers should expand the BOOST program for families and listen to the growing demand from Maryland parents for more choices in education.

BOOST awards not only save taxpayers money but also provide families with meaningful educational options. They also play a role in reducing overcrowding, a significant issue in Maryland's schools.

BOOST scholarship awards are significantly smaller than taxpayer spending per student in Maryland, resulting in cost savings to the state of nearly \$22 Million over 8 years.

The BOOST (Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today) Scholarship program has been a vital resource for families across Maryland, demonstrating its value through the growing number of applications each year, reflecting both strong demand and high parental satisfaction. Every year on Nonpublic School Advocacy Day, hundreds of parents and children gather at the Statehouse in Annapolis and passionately advocate for more funding for the program while sharing countless stories of how the BOOST program has changed the trajectory of their children's lives. One eighth-grade scholarship recipient, Jaidon Contreras, said "BOOST has helped me and my family actually provide a good education for myself."¹ Nefarti Lee, a parent whose two sons were recipients of the scholarship program and graduated in 2022 and 2016, said, "I believe in school choice, and BOOST gives these children opportunities that will help them later in life,"² she also said BOOST is an "invaluable program" and a "lifeline" that "changes lives and helps children thrive."³

Maryland lawmakers should take inspiration from leaders in other states who are rapidly

expanding educational opportunities for families and listen to the growing demand from parents in Maryland for more choices in their children’s education. It’s never too late to positively impact a child’s life, especially when it comes to something as vital as their education.

Background

The BOOST Scholarship program was first signed into law in 2016 by then-Maryland Governor Larry Hogan. Since its inception, approximately 23,000 students have received BOOST scholarships. BOOST is the state’s sole private school choice program, which provides limited-income families with financial assistance to attend non-public schools in the state. The average household income for a family receiving a BOOST scholarship in the 2023-2024 school year was \$43,500, which falls far below Maryland’s median household income of \$98,678 in 2023.⁴⁵ In 2024, the Maryland General Assembly approved funding for the program at \$9 million, \$1 million less than in prior years (2021-2023), and also approved \$2.5 million for schools participating in the BOOST program to access for administering additional health services and school security measures. Applications for BOOST scholarships reached an all-time high of 7,056 during the 2023-2024 school year.⁶ While the total number of applicants slightly decreased to 6,715 for 2024-2025, the number of income-eligible applicants – 4,565 – remained among the highest recorded during the 2020-2025 period.⁷

Beyond the BOOST program, many Maryland families face limited educational choices unless they can afford to pay twice—once through taxes and again for a private school. This report examines the issues concerning Maryland’s budget and education policies and highlights strategies for improvement, including the expansion of educational choice options. It also outlines the significant benefits to families across the state if lawmakers empowered all children with access to more education opportunities.

Maryland’s Budget Crisis and What This Means for Education. Maryland faces a daunting financial challenge in the coming years. The state legislature is grappling with a combined structural and cash deficit exceeding \$1 billion, with analysts warning that this gap could grow to \$2.7 billion by fiscal year 2026.⁸ Beyond this, projections indicate that by 2028, funds specifically reserved for education reforms will be depleted, forcing the state to dip into its general fund to cover these costs.⁹ Looking ahead to fiscal year 2030, the prognosis becomes even bleaker. Budget analysts estimate that Maryland will only generate enough revenue to cover 84 percent of its projected expenses – a shortfall described by the Maryland Department of Legislative Services as the largest in two decades, surpassing even the deficits experienced during the Great Recession.¹⁰ These dire financial forecasts underscore the urgency for Maryland’s leaders to reassess spending priorities.

The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future. The Blueprint for Maryland’s Future, passed in 2021, is a 10-year education reform effort aimed at creating a “world-class education system.” The Blueprint is based on recommendations from the Commission on Innovation and Excellence, created by the Governor and General Assembly in 2016 to make policy recommendations to enhance education in Maryland.¹¹ Its ambitious plans include expanding access to full-day, government-funded pre-K for all three—and four-

year-olds from eligible families, raising starting teacher salaries to \$60,000, setting new college and career readiness standards, establishing the Maryland Consortium on Coordinated Community Supports, which is a new entity responsible for developing a statewide framework to expand access to comprehensive behavioral health services for students, develops a new funding formula based on a new measure of concentration of poverty which will ultimately increase per-pupil spending each school year from \$8,642 in the 2023-2024 school year up to \$12,365 for each student in the 2032-2033 school year *(The amounts mentioned above refer only to what the state contributes per pupil and does not account for county and local contributions. On average, across school districts, Maryland spends \$18,754 per pupil according to the most recent data from the National Center on Education Statistics.) and creates a new Accountability and Implementation Board, an independent unit of state government, that reports to the Governor and the General Assembly on progress made on the implementation of the Blueprint.

To fund these initiatives, Maryland state officials plan to spend \$16.6 billion in additional state funds between 2024 and 2029, with billions more expected in subsequent years.¹² However, a recent report from the Local News Network at the University of Maryland warned that progress toward the Blueprint is already depleting state reserves, which are projected to run out by 2027.¹³ Compounding this problem, the General Assembly has yet to develop a long-term plan to fund the full 10-year reform effort.¹⁴

Implementation Challenges. The rollout of the Blueprint has been fraught with delays and concerns. Deadlines for implementation criteria and plans have been extended at least three times, and school officials across Maryland have raised red flags about district-level plans submitted earlier this year.¹⁵

For instance, the St. Mary's County Public School system reported that funding tied to specific programs "requires the elimination of other programs and supports."¹⁶ Similarly, a Harford County Executive criticized the plan, stating, "Unrealistic state spending mandates for the Blueprint for Education are straining local budgets statewide and should be paused and revisited."¹⁷

The concerns are widespread. As of March 2024, 15 of Maryland's 24 school districts identified funding or resource allocation as one of their top three challenges under the Blueprint.¹⁸ In November 2023, the Maryland Association of Counties outlined significant issues to the Governor, noting that the Blueprint's cost estimates fail to account for the local financial impact of several major spending requirements. This, they argued, would hinder counties' ability to meet other basic operational needs.¹⁹ An analyst added that the Blueprint's cost projections were made before inflation surged during the latter stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, further complicating budget planning.²⁰

Educator Concerns. Teachers and administrators have also expressed frustration with the Blueprint's implementation. Javier Valera, a math content specialist in Montgomery County, notes that he and his colleagues "have no clue about the depth of

information in the Blueprint” despite being the ones tasked with executing it.²¹ Similarly, Sparkle Jefferson, an assistant principal in Prince George’s County, shared concerns about poor communication, saying, “There’s a lot of information that definitely needs to be clarified.”²²

Solutions for Maryland’s Education Crisis

Next Steps. To address these challenges, lawmakers should give counties greater flexibility to prioritize aspects of the Blueprint that are more meaningful for their local school systems. This approach could reduce costs and make the plan more feasible for both state and local governments. Additionally, advancing education choice programs—proven to generate cost savings among other benefits discussed in their paper—could help offset looming budget shortfalls while providing families with more educational options.

Impact of School Choice Programs on State Finances. School choice programs across the United States are not just educationally transformative but also create fiscal savings. Education choice delivers significant cost savings to their states, freeing up resources for other needs. A report released in October 2024 analyzed 48 school choice programs in 25 states – including five education savings account programs, 22 school voucher programs, and 21 tax-credit scholarship programs – revealed that they “generated cumulative net fiscal benefits for state and local taxpayers combined ranging from an estimated \$19.4 billion to \$45.6 billion.”²³

Notably, because all the programs studied had been operational for more than five years by fiscal year 2022, the report suggests “the fiscal benefits are likely closer to the high-end estimate of \$45.6 billion.”²⁴ To put this into perspective, for every dollar spent on a school choice program, “states experienced fiscal benefits worth an estimated \$1.70 to \$2.64,”²⁵ an impressive return on investment that underscores the efficiency of these programs.

Robust evidence supports the positive fiscal impact of school choice. Of 75 studies examining 24 voucher programs, 18 tax-credit programs, three education savings account programs, and one privately funded scholarship program in 23 states and Washington, DC, 68 reports found that these programs generated net savings for taxpayers.²⁶ Five studies determined the programs were cost-neutral, while another five estimated net costs.²⁷ However, even among the studies citing net costs, four reported long-term net savings, which means that financial advantages often materialize over time.²⁸

This evidence points to a clear trend: school choice programs not only save taxpayers money but also provide families with meaningful educational options. For example, cost savings could be redirected to other pressing state priorities such as infrastructure, public safety, or additional educational initiatives. Simultaneously, these programs empower parents to choose schools that align with their children’s unique needs and aspirations. As states continue to face budgetary pressures, expanding school choice could offer a dual benefit, alleviating fiscal constraints while ensuring every child has access to a quality education.

Cost Savings of the BOOST Program. BOOST scholarship awards are significantly smaller than taxpayer spending per student in Maryland, resulting in cost savings. These cost savings are realized partly because when students transfer from public to private schools, public schools are no longer educating those students. However, schools realize cost savings in the future because, though schools have some short-run fixed costs such as facility operations and maintenance, in the long run, all costs are variable costs. Taxpayers spent \$18,754 per pupil on public education in Maryland (according to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education)²⁹, but the average BOOST scholarship award is around \$3,100.³⁰ A CATO Institute report found that from 2016-2019, Maryland had \$5.8 million in net savings from BOOST participation.³¹ Building on what the CATO report found and looking at the years 2016-2024, it is estimated that BOOST voucher payments were about \$59.1 million, and Maryland's Department of Education costs were reduced by about \$80.8 million, resulting in about \$21.6 million in net savings for Maryland.³²

Increased Public School Spending Has Not Yielded Better Outcomes. Public school spending on K-12 education has increased dramatically over the last six decades, even when adjusted for inflation. As of 2020, spending had risen by an astonishing 280 percent since 1960.³³ On average, K-12 school districts across the United States now spend about \$17,280 per pupil annually. In comparison, Maryland spends slightly more, allocating approximately \$18,754 per student.³⁴

Despite this investment, Maryland continues to underperform on key educational benchmarks. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a congressionally mandated assessment that measures student proficiency across various subjects, reveals troubling trends.³⁵ The most recent NAEP results show that a majority of Maryland's fourth and eighth-grade students are not proficient in mathematics or reading.³⁶ Alarming, 75 percent of eighth graders scored at or below the basic achievement level in mathematics.³⁷ This disconnect between increased spending and student outcomes raises questions about how education funds are utilized and underscores the need for more effective strategies to improve student achievement. In 2022, the average NAEP score for fourth-grade reading in Maryland was 212, compared to 225 for Floridian students and 215 for Arizonian students, despite Maryland spending significantly more on education.³⁸ Florida's average per-pupil expenditure was \$10,823³⁹, while Arizona's was \$9,571⁴⁰.

Overcrowding in Maryland Public Schools. Expanding access to school choice programs could help alleviate overcrowding in Maryland public schools by allowing families to select schools beyond their assigned zones. This flexibility could lead to a more balanced distribution of students across schools, easing the burden on overpopulated facilities. Overcrowding is a significant issue in many parts of the state. In Baltimore County, nearly a third of all schools are considered overcrowded by state standards.⁴¹ Out of 164 schools in Baltimore County, 50 are operating at more than 100 percent capacity.⁴² For example, one high school built to accommodate 1,446 students currently enrolls 2,134 – a staggering 148 percent of its intended capacity.⁴³ This issue extends beyond Baltimore County. In Howard County, 16 out of 78 schools are becoming overcrowded, and projections suggest the problem will worsen, with some

“expected to reach 110 percent capacity or higher by 2028.”⁴⁴ Private schools, which often have available seats, could absorb some of the additional students. By expanding school choice, Maryland could give families more options while addressing the logistical challenges of overcrowded public schools.

Maryland has Limited Options for Families. Outside of the relatively small BOOST program, parents in Maryland have few choices when it comes to their children’s education. Access to quality schools often depends on a family’s ability to purchase an expensive home in a desirable school district or to pay twice – once through taxes and again for private tuition. Maryland does not offer interdistrict or intradistrict open enrollment policies, meaning students aren’t able to transfer to other schools within or outside of their residential school district.⁴⁵ Charter schools are the only publicly funded education choice option, but they are largely concentrated in the Baltimore-Washington area, with 31 of the state’s 48 charter schools in Baltimore City.⁴⁶ Thus, they are relatively inaccessible to many Marylanders.

Maryland’s charter school policies also rank poorly on a national scale. The National Alliance for Public Charters placed Maryland last in its 2022 state public charter school law rankings.⁴⁷ The low score they cited reflects the state’s restrictive laws, which offer limited autonomy for charter schools, and do not allow for alternative authorizers outside of local school districts.⁴⁸ By restricting charter approval to local school systems, which many view charters as competitors, Maryland further stifles the growth of this option – despite strong parental demand for alternatives.

A report highlights this demand, stating that more than four out of five Marylanders (82 percent) would prefer to choose from a variety of educational options, including private schools, charter schools, virtual schools, and homeschooling.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, Maryland offers families few meaningful alternatives to their zoned public schools.

Remaining Competitive with Other States. BOOST is relatively small compared to other school choice initiatives in a nearby jurisdiction. In Washington, D.C., the Opportunity Scholarship offers \$17.5 million annually to help financially needy families afford private school tuition.⁵⁰ While not neighboring Maryland, states like Florida and Arizona have implemented similar programs on a significantly larger scale, offering valuable insights into the potential growth and impact of such activities. In Arizona, the Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESA) program offers every student an ESA funded at 90 percent of the state’s per-student base funding.⁵¹ As of 2024, the majority of ESA scholarships are worth between \$7,000 and \$8,000 per year per child.⁵² In Florida, the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options program offers every student an education savings account (ESA) funded through the Florida Education Finance Plan.⁵³ For the 2021-2022 school year, the ESA was worth \$7,612.⁵⁴

Across the United States, education choice programs are rapidly expanding. In 2023, some of the most significant advancements in school choice were made by adopting new programs and expansions of existing choice policies. Seven states passed new education choice policies, and eight expanded existing choice policies.⁵⁵ The momentum continued into 2024. Today, 11 states offer universal education choice programs, allowing any

family to access their share of public education dollars and use them for private school tuition, school at home, virtual learning, or other approved educational options. These states – Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Louisiana, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah, and West Virginia—use mechanisms such as tax credit scholarships, education savings accounts, vouchers, or account-style programs to provide this flexibility.⁵⁶

The impact of these programs is profound. As of 2023, there have been 187 studies on the impact of education choice as it relates to educational attainment and achievement, parent satisfaction, fiscal effects, school safety, and more.⁵⁷ Eighty-four percent of the studies show a positive effect, ten percent show no impact, and only six percent exhibit a negative result.⁵⁸ In addition, as of June 2024, more than 1 million students were participating in a K-12 education choice program nationwide, a figure that has doubled since 2019.⁵⁹ States implementing these programs report growing demand as families seek greater control over their children’s education.⁶⁰

Research demonstrates that, in traditional public school assignment systems, where children are assigned schools based on their family’s home location, many families are willing to pay higher housing costs to secure access to highly-ranked schools.⁶¹ However, research also finds that in areas with greater school choice, “families were less likely to move to zip codes with higher-quality schools,” as they have more educational options beyond their residential zones.⁶² This allows families to avoid substantial increases in their monthly housing costs, granting them greater financial flexibility and freedom.

Benefits of School Choice for Children and Families. Education choice provides many benefits for the families who opt to participate. It has had a **positive impact on school safety and climate**. Eight studies examined school choice’s effect on school safety; all eight found positive effects, and none found negative effects.⁶³ Another 2016 study found that “school choice participants in Milwaukee were half as likely to commit felonies and misdemeanors as those who went to their local public school.”⁶⁴ Education choice also **creates accountability among schools**. It empowers parents with accountability, motivating schools to address the needs of their students. Unsatisfied parents can opt to transfer their children and education funds elsewhere, creating a meaningful incentive for schools to excel. There have been 29 studies that have examined the competitive effects of school choice programs. Twenty-six found positive results (they boosted the test scores of students who remain in public schools), one found no visible effect, and only two found negative effects.⁶⁵ It also **increases academic achievement and attainment among students**. Regarding **academic achievement**, 17 random-assignment studies have been conducted to test whether students who are attending a private school of their choice who have received and/or are using a scholarship have obtained higher test scores. Of the 17 studies, 11 found positive effects, four found neutral effects, and only two found negative ones.⁶⁶ However, the two negative studies were conducted in 2018 and 2021 in Louisiana, when the voucher program was still highly regulated and discouraged high-performing private schools from participating.⁶⁷ Additionally, Florida, a trailblazer in school choice, recently achieved its highest-ever NAEP rankings for fourth and eighth grades.⁶⁸ The state earned top-five scores in key categories and celebrated two decades of progress in

narrowing achievement gaps for minority, low-income, and disabled students.⁶⁹ Black Floridian fourth-grade students' NAEP scores are third nationally for reading and second for math, and Hispanic Floridian fourth-grade students are ranked number one for reading and second for math.⁷⁰ Regarding **academic attainment**, seven studies have examined whether school choice programs affect “students’ likelihood to graduate high school, enroll in college, or attain a college degree.”⁷¹ Of the seven studies, five found positive effects, two were neutral, and none showed negative effects.⁷² Education choice policies **also help to foster racial integration**. Eight studies have examined school choice’s effect on “racial and ethnic diversity in schools.”⁷³ Seven studies found positive effects, one was neutral, and none found adverse effects.⁷⁴

Policy Recommendations

Expand Education Choice Opportunities in the State. The Maryland Legislature could adopt several education choice policies that would expand educational options for families in their state. First, the state could adopt open enrollment, in which every child could cross pre-drawn school boundaries and allow them to attend a school anywhere in the state. Forty-three U.S. states offer some form of open enrollment, with eleven of them requiring it by law.⁷⁵ Maryland could also consider reforming its charter school law, which was first adopted in 2003. Such reforms could include allowing charter schools with the option to lease vacant school buildings and allowing the establishment of independent charter school authorizing boards that would have the authority to review and approve charter applications.⁷⁶

Expand and Convert the Existing Voucher Program into an ESA. When the legislature reconvenes in January 2025, Maryland state lawmakers could pass legislation **to make BOOST a permanent program and increase funding levels to meet demand**. Ahead of the 2024-2025 academic year, the program received 6,715 applications, of which 4,565 were determined income-eligible.⁷⁷ The program would have needed \$15.5 million in appropriations funding to meet parents’ demand.⁷⁸ State lawmakers could also consider **converting the BOOST scholarship into an education savings account (ESA)**. With an ESA, families can customize their child’s education and pay for private school tuition, tutoring, textbooks, online courses, educational therapy, and more. Another feature of ESAs is that unused funds can be rolled over each year and even deposited into a college savings account if not used for K-12 expenses. In some states where families have access to ESAs now, any funds that remain in a student’s account after high school graduation revert to the state after a period of 2-4 years if students do not use the accounts for postsecondary expenses. Maryland lawmakers could also **expand scholarship eligibility for all students**. Doing away with the current income limit for participation that restricts the annual participation of children will open up the program to more families from diverse backgrounds and incentivize greater engagement of private schools and the broader community.

Modify the funding model to be formula-funded instead of an annual line-item appropriation. Maryland lawmakers could consider making the BOOST program a part of the state funding formula for assigned K-12 schools, not a separate

appropriation. Adopting a formula-funded model would minimize the political debates associated with annual appropriations and the shifting priorities of different administrations.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The BOOST Scholarship program has been an asset for parents across Maryland. When lawmakers reconvene this January at the Statehouse in Annapolis, they should expand educational choice opportunities in the state, such as adopting open enrollment, allowing charter schools to lease vacant school buildings, allowing for the establishment of independent charter school authorizing boards that would have the power authority to review and approve charter applications, make BOOST a permanent program and increase funding levels to meet demand, convert the BOOST voucher into an education savings account, expand scholarship eligibility for all students, and modify the BOOST funding model to be formula-funded instead of an annual line-item appropriation. Adopting these measures would allow for the exponential growth of educational choice opportunities in the state. It would grant parents a multitude of choices when it comes to their child's education.

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² "Making their voices heard: Nonpublic school students who need BOOST program go to Annapolis, share success stories with Maryland lawmakers," The Dialog, March 6, 2023, <https://thediolog.org/education-and-careers/making-their-voices-heard-nonpublic-school-students-who-need-boost-program/>.

³ "BOOST funding preserved by Maryland lawmakers," George P. Matysek, April 3, 2023, <https://catholicreview.org/boost-funding-preserved-by-maryland-lawmakers/>.

⁴ "Joint Chairman's Report BOOST," Maryland State Department of Education, January 15, 2024, <https://marylandpublicschools.org/Documents/boost/20232024/JCR-Report-BOOST-Jan-24-A.pdf>.

⁵ "Maryland State Profile," US Census Bureau, <https://data.census.gov/profile/Maryland?g=040XX00US24>.

⁶ "Joint Chairman's Report BOOST."

⁷ "BOOST Advisory Board Meeting 2024-06-26 11AM," MSDE TV, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_IFWCpJf8E.

⁸ "Ferguson: 'Everything is on the table' to address budget deficit," Bryan P. Sears, November 18, 2024, <https://marylandmatters.org/2024/11/18/ferguson-everything-is-on-the-table-to-address-budget-deficit/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Five-year state budget projection foresees 'enormous gap' not seen in two decades," Bryan P. Sears, November 12, 2024, <https://marylandmatters.org/2024/11/12/five-year-state-budget-projection-foresees-enormous-gap-not-seen-in-two-decades/>.

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¹² "Unrealistic and Unfunded: Maryland's Blueprint for education has counties concerned," Olivia Borgula and Olivia Yasharoff, May 7, 2024, <https://moco360.media/2024/05/07/unrealistic-and-unfunded-marylands-blueprint-for-education-has-counties-concerned/>.

¹³ "Blueprint or budget-breaker? No one knows how to pay for Maryland's massive education reform," Kiersten Hacker and Christina Walker, March 5, 2024, <https://moco360.media/2024/03/05/blueprint-or-budget-breaker-no-one-knows-how-to-pay-for-marylands-massive-education-reform/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Will Maryland’s Blueprint for education work? An oversight board – and district officials – will be watching,” Lizzy Alspach and Apurva Mahajan, May 13, 2024, <https://cnsmaryland.org/2024/05/13/will-marylands-blueprint-for-education-work-an-oversight-board-and-district-officials-will-be-watching/>.

¹⁶ “Unrealistic and Unfunded: Maryland’s Blueprint for education has counties concerned,”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “Will Maryland’s Blueprint for education work? An oversight board – and district officials – will be watching.”

²² Ibid.

²³ “The Fiscal Effects of School Choice: The Costs and Savings of Private School Choice Programs in America through FY 2022,” by Martin Lueken and Cooper Conway, October 2024, <https://www.edchoice.org/engage/the-fiscal-effects-of-school-choice/#:~:text=From%20their%20inception%20through%20FY,%2419.4%20billion%20to%20%2445.6%20billion.>

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³² Based on the author’s calculations, which replicate the cost analysis methodology used by the CATO Institute: These figures were derived by multiplying the number of public school transfers each year by the estimated, unrounded per-pupil variable cost to calculate the annual education savings. Non-transfer students were treated as a direct expense, contributing no savings. In the first year, BOOST voucher payments cost taxpayers approximately \$4.8 million but reduced educational expenses by \$5.6 million, resulting in a net budgetary savings of \$855,119. This process was repeated for the years 2017–2024. Sources: *Joint Chairman’s Report(s) - BOOST 2016–2024, Selected Financial Data Maryland Public Schools, Part 3 – Analysis of Costs, SY2016–2023*, and *The Fiscal Effects of School Choice Programs on Public School Districts* by Ben Scafidi (March 2012).

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