



Research Brief

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Education Choice in Maryland Opportunities on the Horizon

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Persistent lackluster public school performance and persistent fiscal constraints make expanding school options more important than ever.

74% of Marylanders with school-aged children, and 84% of African Americans with school-aged children, support Education Savings Accounts (ESA's).

Failure to opt into the recently passed Federal School Choice Tax Credit program could prevent Maryland families from accessing more than a half billion dollars in funds for education.

Introduction

In the 2024-2025 school year, Maryland saw modest gains in mathematics and English language arts on the Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP); however, there are very large gaps between demographic groups.^[1] These improvements mirrored national trends reported by the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which showed continued recovery in reading and some gains in mathematics for Maryland students.^[2] Even so, Maryland remains below pre-pandemic achievement levels and ranks in the bottom half of states on fourth- and eighth-grade mathematics scores.^[3]

At the same time, Maryland faces a growing fiscal constraint. The state projects a \$1.6 billion budget deficit ahead of the 2026 meeting of the General Assembly, and projected deficits of up to \$3.4 billion by fiscal year 2030.^[4] Education spending already accounts for a substantial and growing share of the state budget, driven largely by commitments under

the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.^[5] As policymakers seek to maintain academic progress while navigating fiscal pressure, they should consider expanding educational options for families, which will ultimately reduce costs, encourage competition, and increase academic achievement and attainment over time.

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Legislative Landscape for School Choice in Maryland

Over the past several legislative sessions, Maryland lawmakers have introduced several bills to expand educational options for students.

In 2025, H.B. 1180, the *Right to Learn Act*, would have expanded the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) program and allowed students in failing schools to participate.^[6] In 2024, H.B. 675 proposed a universal Education Savings Account (ESA) program that would have provided state-funded education accounts to all students regardless of income.^[7] That same year, H.R. 704 proposed a means-tested ESA program that would have allowed students to access a portion of per-pupil spending through an ESA if their families met certain income criteria.^[8]

While these bills reflect growing interest in expanding education choice, none advanced beyond early committee stages. As a result, Maryland's education choice landscape remains largely limited to the BOOST Scholarship Program, which serves a small share of students.

Investigative reporting by Fox 45's *Project Baltimore* has documented the considerable influence of the Maryland teachers' union (the Maryland State Education Association, MSEA) in the Maryland legislature, particularly on education. Project Baltimore reported that MSEA has contributed funds to 114 of the 188 members of the General Assembly and has contributed more than \$530,000 to current legislators.^[9]

One former legislator told Project Baltimore that he has heard from former colleagues that the union "is out of control," but legislators won't do anything about it because that would mean they wouldn't endorse them.^[10] Maryland Teachers Union members have consistently been opposed to school choice efforts in Maryland.^[11] This broader policy environment helps explain why choice proposals, even when widely discussed, have struggled to advance.

Public Support for Education Choice

Public opinion data suggests that Maryland residents express substantial support for expanded educational options. According to EdChoice's November 2025 Public Opinion Tracker, approximately three-fourths of parents in Maryland with school-aged children support the adoption of Education Savings Accounts, and more than two-thirds of adults do as well.^[12] A separate statewide survey recently found that 74 percent of Maryland voters support giving parents the freedom to choose the best educational setting for their children.^[13] Interestingly, among Democrats, 64 percent back such legislation, while an overwhelming 84 percent of African Americans expressed their support.^[14]

These figures make it clear: educational choice is not a partisan issue but a shared priority across demographics and political groups.

The BOOST Scholarship Program

Maryland's only private school choice program is the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) Scholarship program. BOOST provides low-income families with financial assistance to attend nonpublic schools in the state. The program was first signed into law in 2016 by then-Maryland Governor Larry Hogan. Since its inception, approximately 26,000 students have received BOOST scholarships.^[15]

The average household income for a family receiving a BOOST scholarship in the 2024-2025 school year was \$44,867^[16], which falls far below Maryland's median household income of \$109,700 in 2024^[17]. In 2025, the Maryland General Assembly approved funding for the program at \$9 million, \$1 million less than in prior years (2021-2023).

Demand for the program has continued to exceed available funding. For the 2025-2026 school year, there were 6,381 applications, of which 4,249 met income-eligibility requirements.^[18] However, due to funding constraints, the number of approved applicants (not yet publicly released) will be much lower. In the prior year, only 2,403 of 4,565 applicants^[19] were awarded scholarships due to funding limits.^[20]

Based on eligibility criteria, approximately 24 percent of Maryland's K-12 students could qualify for BOOST, yet fewer than 1 percent participate due to limited appropriations.^[21] As a result, many families who meet program requirements remain on waiting lists.

Fiscal Effects 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 partly due to the fact that when students transfer from public to private schools, public schools no longer educate those students. However, schools realize cost savings in the future because, although they have some short-run fixed costs, such as facility operations and maintenance, in the long run, all costs are variable.

Taxpayers spent \$18,754 per pupil on public education in Maryland (according to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education)^[22], but the average BOOST scholarship award is around \$3,535.^[23] A CATO Institute report found that from 2016 to 2019, Maryland had \$5.8 million in net savings from BOOST participation.^[24] Extending those estimates through 2025 suggests that \$67.6 million in scholarship payments

corresponded with roughly \$93.6 million in avoided state education costs, yielding an estimated \$26 million in net savings over the period.^[25]

These savings arise because when students use scholarships to attend nonpublic schools, the state no longer incurs the marginal cost of educating those students in public systems over time.

The Federal Tax Credit Scholarship Opportunity

The first-ever federal tax credit scholarship program was enacted as part of HR 1, *An Act to Provide for Reconciliation Pursuant to Title II of H. Con. Res. 14*, which the President signed into law on July 4, 2025. The federal scholarship tax credit is a \$1,700 tax credit for individual donors who contribute to a scholarship-granting organization (SGO) that provides scholarships to students. Individuals will owe \$1,700 less in federal taxes for a \$1,700 donation to an SGO. However, for constituents in any state to participate, the governor must opt in to the program each year.

Those who will qualify for the scholarships supplied by the SGO have to come from a household with an income of less than 300 percent of the median income of the area they live in (in the calendar year prior to the date a family is applying for the scholarship) and be enrolled in any K-12 school, whether that be traditional public, private, public charter, religious, or homeschool. The program is scheduled to begin in January 2027, following the issuance of Treasury Department regulations.

Estimated Contributions from Maryland

In October of 2025, Education Reform Now (ERN) released state-by-state estimates of how much money could be redirected to scholarship-granting organizations to fund scholarships for school-aged children. For Maryland, ERN estimates that nearly 35 percent of taxpayers have a tax liability of at least \$1,700, indicating they are likely interested in donating to offset their federal tax liability.^[26] This equates to 1,080,074 “redirectors,” those who would be interested in redirecting funds from the IRS to an SGO.^[27]

Of that population, they estimate take-up rates of one, fifteen, and thirty percent of the population, and approximate that could mean about \$18 million directed to SGOs if there’s only a one percent take-up rate, around \$275 million with a 15 percent take-up rate, and more than half a billion with a 30 percent take-up rate.^[28] They also note that most state tax credit programs have aggregate caps and allow for very large individual donations, rather than “building broad-based participation.”^[29]

Given this and the structure of the federal program, ERN notes that the take-up rate may be on the higher end, indicating even greater participation in the future.^[30] Because

taxpayers can donate to other SGOs, if Maryland does not opt in, it could lose access to more than half a billion dollars in taxpayer funds for educational pursuits.

To put those numbers into perspective, that estimate (a 30% take-up rate, which equates to more than half a billion) is more than 50 times what is appropriated annually for the BOOST Scholarship program. Even a Maryland resident (the former deputy mayor of Baltimore) who opposes the federal tax credit scholarship program acknowledges that, if the Governor opts out, “many constituents will lose valuable benefits.”^[31]

Student Eligibility and School Supply

In order to be eligible to receive a scholarship from an SGO, a child has to come from a household with an income of less than 300 percent of the median income of the area they live in and be enrolled in any K-12 school, whether that be traditional public, private, public charter, religious, or homeschool.

Based on data from the Maryland Department of Education, an estimated 1,005,582 children were enrolled in public, private, or homeschool settings in 2023 (the most recent year of data available for all three populations). Based on the scholarship eligibility criteria, approximately 950,000^[32] of those children would be eligible for a scholarship through an SGO. That means approximately 94 percent of K-12 children living in Maryland could be eligible to benefit. (This is an estimate of the number of K-12 students in Maryland, across all school types, living in households with incomes below 300 percent of their county’s median household income.)

Concerns about whether there are sufficient school options are mitigated by Maryland’s high geographic access to private schools. A recent report from the Urban Institute found that the share of school-aged children living within 10 miles of a private school in Maryland, particularly an elementary school, was 99 percent, for middle school, 99 percent, and for high school, 97 percent of school-aged children.^[33]

When broken down by community type, 83 percent of school-aged children live within 10 miles of a private school in rural areas, and 100 percent live within 10 miles of one in urban areas. For families receiving SGO scholarships or participating in the BOOST scholarship program, opportunities for non-public education are highly accessible.

Evidence on School Choice Outcomes

A large body of research has examined the effects of education choice programs. Eight studies examined school choice’s effect on school safety; all eight found positive effects, and none found negative effects.^[34] 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.”^[35]

Education choice also creates accountability among schools. It empowers parents by holding them accountable, motivating schools to address their students' needs. 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 examining 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.^[36]

Expanded choice 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.^[37] 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.^[38]

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."^[39] Of the seven studies, five found positive effects, two were neutral, and none showed negative effects.^[40]

Education choice policies also help to foster racial integration. Eight studies have examined the effect of school choice on "racial and ethnic diversity in schools."^[41] Seven studies found positive effects, one was neutral, and none found adverse effects.^[42] It is hard to ignore the numerous benefits of educational choice for children. State lawmakers should consider these benefits when determining whether to expand choice within their state.

Policy Recommendations

Expand Education Choice Opportunities in the State. During the 2026 legislative session, the Maryland legislature could adopt several education choice policies that would expand educational options for families in the state. First, the state could adopt open enrollment, allowing every child to cross pre-drawn school boundaries and attend a school anywhere in the state. Currently, 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.^[43] However, forty-three U.S. states offer some form of open enrollment, with eleven of them requiring it by law.^[44]

Expand and Convert the Existing Voucher Program into an ESA. Maryland state lawmakers could pass legislation to make BOOST a permanent program and increase funding levels to meet demand. Ahead of the 2025-2026 academic year, the program

received 6,381 applications, of which 4,249 were determined income-eligible. The program would have needed almost \$15 million in appropriations funding to meet parents' demand.^[45]

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 now have access to ESAs, any funds that remain in a student's account after high school graduation revert to the state after 2-4 years if the student does not use the account for postsecondary expenses.

Maryland lawmakers could also expand scholarship eligibility for all students. Doing away with the current income limit for participation, which restricts children's annual participation, will open up the program to more families from diverse backgrounds and incentivize greater engagement from private schools and the broader community. At a minimum, legislation should include a continuity-of-eligibility provision allowing families whose income rises modestly to remain in the program. This would prevent families from being penalized for increased earnings and would promote stability for students already enrolled.

Modify the funding model to be formula-funded instead of an annual line-item appropriation. Maryland lawmakers could consider making the BOOST program part of the state funding formula for assigned K-12 schools rather than a separate appropriation. Adopting a formula-funded model would minimize the political debates associated with annual appropriations and shifting priorities across administrations.^[46]

Opt-in to the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship Program. The Governor should consider opting into participating in the federal tax credit scholarship program. An estimated 94 percent of Maryland children stand to benefit from the program, and as much as half a billion in taxpayer funds (at a 30 percent take-up rate) could be used for educational choice options.

CONCLUSION

In January 2026, Governor Wes Moore proclaimed Maryland School Choice Week, recognizing the diversity of educational options available to families across the state.^[47] Yet for many Maryland families, access to alternatives remains limited by geography, income, and program capacity.

Outside of the BOOST program and a limited number of charter schools^[48], families seeking alternatives to their assigned public school must often bear the full financial cost themselves, effectively paying twice for their child's education. At a time of fiscal

constraint and academic recovery, Maryland has an opportunity to align its policies more closely with the aspirations reflected in the Governor’s proclamation by broadening educational options and encouraging the General Assembly to do the same.

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ENDNOTES:

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Two limitations should be noted. First, the ACS does not report income at the student level, so eligibility is estimated using county-level household income distributions rather than observed family income. Second, because the federal tax-credit scholarship program will not begin until 2027, these estimates are based on 2023 enrollment and income data and may differ from future conditions.

Two assumptions underlie these estimates. The first is that incomes are uniformly distributed within each ACS income bracket. The second assumption concerns households in the highest income range. Because the ACS top-codes all incomes above approximately \$200,000, it is not possible to distinguish households earning moderately above that level from those earning far above it. Using state-level income distribution data for the top 1 percent and top 5 percent of earners, households with incomes above \$400,000 were treated as fully exceeding the 300-percent-of-median threshold for purposes of estimating eligibility. The federal statute defines eligibility as households with income not exceeding 300 percent of the “area median gross income.” Because both ACS income distributions and Maryland enrollment data are reported by county rather than by census area, county median household income was used as the best available proxy. In some cases, area-based medians may differ from county medians, which could cause actual eligibility counts to be somewhat higher or lower than these estimates.

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[https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B19013?g=040XXooUS24\\$0500000](https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2023.B19013?g=040XXooUS24$0500000); Public Enrollment Data "Table 3. Total Public Enrollment (Grades K-12), by Jurisdiction, Actual (2023) & Projected (2024-2032)" *used the 2023 numbers:

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