

# EdChoice Policy Toolkit

## Testing: Single Test or Menu of Options?

### QUESTION

Should choice students be required to take the same tests as district school students?

### ANSWER

It's a common refrain: public dollars require public accountability. If students use publicly funded vouchers or education savings accounts to attend private schools, the public has a right to know if the educational choice programs are actually providing access to quality education providers. Therefore, the argument goes, choice students should take the same tests that district school students take.

There is a lot of merit to the premise of this argument, but the conclusion does not follow. Mandating a single test for all schools creates serious unintended consequences that can undermine the value of educational choice. Fortunately, there is a way to empower families with important information about their child's performance and demonstrate the choice program's overall effectiveness to the public without these unintended consequences. Rather than mandate a single test, such as the state test, choice programs should allow families and education providers to select from a menu of nationally norm-referenced (NNR) tests—like the SAT, Stanford 10 or Iowa Test of Basic Skills—which show how well a student is doing relative to her peers.<sup>1</sup>

Advocates of a single test stress that it's the only way to provide “apples-to-apples” comparisons. That's true, but the benefits of being able to make such comparisons are not worth the costs. Mandating a single test—especially when combined with rewards and punishments for performance on that test—can distort how education providers operate, including inducing homogeneity in curricular offerings and impelling high-quality education providers to refrain from participating in the program.

When forced to administer a particular test, schools have a strong incentive to change how they operate to perform better on that test. If that meant improving quality, then the change in behavior would be welcome. However, too often it means distorting learning in unhealthy ways, including:

- Diverting time away from untested subjects: If the state test focuses only on math and language arts, then schools have a strong incentive to spend more time on those subjects at the expense of all others, including history, art, music and even lunch and recess. A study by the Center on Education Policy found that, in response to the No Child Left Behind state test mandate, “approximately 62% of school districts increased the amount of time spent in elementary schools on English language arts and or math, while 44% of districts cut time on science, social studies, art and music, physical education, lunch or recess.”<sup>2</sup>
- Changing how tested subjects are taught: Even within tested subject, schools face pressure to focus on concepts that are covered on the state test at the expense of concepts they might have otherwise covered that are not on the test. In this case, schools would be making decisions about what to teach children based on what's on the test rather than what they believe is the best way to teach. They might also teach skills a certain way that align with the test—such as a constructivist approach to math instead of using traditional algorithms—rather than teach the skills in the way they believe is most effective.
- Wasting time on test-taking strategies at the expense of real learning: Even worse than the above is when schools spend precious instruction time teaching children strategies to improve their scores on the state test that do nothing to further their content knowledge or improve their skills.

Private schools that are unwilling to distort their curriculum and teaching practices to align with the state test face a choice: operate at a disadvantage relative or avoid participating in the choice program altogether. Many choose the latter. For example, a 2015 survey by the American Enterprise Institute found that among Louisiana private school leaders who opted not to have their school accept vouchers, 68 percent cited concerns about the state testing requirement.<sup>3</sup> In a 2018 experimental evaluation of the effects of various regulations on private school participation in choice programs, researchers found that requiring the state standardized test significantly reduced the likelihood that private schools in Florida would participate in the program.<sup>4</sup> The state test mandate decreased the likelihood that the private school principal was “certain to participate” in a hypothetical voucher program by about 11 to 14 percentage points, or 46 to 55 percent. In a 2019 follow-up study of school leaders in New York and California, the state test requirement reduced the willingness of school leaders to participate in a voucher program by 9 percentage points, or 29 percent.<sup>5</sup>

Overreliance on testing is especially worrisome given the recent and growing research literature finding a disconnect between test scores and later life outcomes for which they are supposed to be a proxy.<sup>6</sup> Numerous studies have found that interventions that have a positive effect on test scores do not produce positive effects on later life outcomes (e.g., high school graduation, college matriculation, adult wages, etc.) or vice-versa. According to an analysis of dozens of studies of the effects of school choice programs by the American Enterprise Institute, the “impact on student test scores is a weak predictor of its impacts on longer-term outcomes.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, the analysis found:

Programs that produced no measurable positive impacts on achievement have frequently produced positive impacts on attainment. And on the other hand, null effects on high school graduation and college attendance have been reported from programs that produced substantial test score gains.<sup>8</sup>

When private schools eschew participation in choice programs or alter their curriculum in teaching practices to more closely mirror public schools, the value of educational choice is undermined. Standardized tests can provide valuable information, but the advantages of mandating a single test are far outweighed by the costs. By contrast, when schools can choose from a menu of nationally norm-referenced tests, they face no pressure to conform their curriculum or teaching practices to a particular test. Ultimately, a menu of tests strikes the right balance between accountability and autonomy, giving families a range of diverse options to choose from as well as information they need to choose wisely.

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<sup>1</sup> It's worth noting that most state tests are “criterion-referenced” tests, meaning that a student's performance is compared against a certain standard. By contrast, “norm-referenced” tests compare a student's performance against the performance of other students.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer McMurrer, “NCLB Year 5: Choices, Changes, and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era,” Center on Education Policy, July 24, 2007, [www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=312/](http://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=312/).

<sup>3</sup> Brian Kisida, Patrick J. Wolf, and Evan Rhinesmith, “Views from Private Schools: Attitudes about School Choice Programs in Three States,” American Enterprise Institute, January 2015, [www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Views-from-Private-Schools-7.pdf/](http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Views-from-Private-Schools-7.pdf/).

<sup>4</sup> Corey DeAngelis, Lindsey Burke, and Patrick Wolf, “The Effects of Regulations on Private School Choice Program Participation: Experimental Evidence from Florida,” EDRE Working Paper No. 2018-08, October 22, 2018. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3273428> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3273428>

<sup>5</sup> Corey DeAngelis, Lindsey Burke, and Patrick Wolf, “The Effects of Regulations on Private School Choice Program Participation: Experimental Evidence from California and New York,” EDRE Working Paper No. 2019-07, March 12, 2019. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3349453> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3349453>

<sup>6</sup> Jay P. Greene, “Evidence for the Disconnect Between Changing Test Scores and Changing Later Life Outcomes,” Education Next, November 7, 2016, [www.educationnext.org/evidence-for-the-disconnect-between-changing-test-scores-and-changing-later-life-outcomes/](http://www.educationnext.org/evidence-for-the-disconnect-between-changing-test-scores-and-changing-later-life-outcomes/).

<sup>7</sup> Fredrick Hess, “,” American Enterprise Institute, March 20, 2018, [www.aei.org/education/how-much-do-test-scores-tell-us-about-school-choice/](http://www.aei.org/education/how-much-do-test-scores-tell-us-about-school-choice/).

<sup>8</sup> Collin Hitt, Michael Q. McShane, and Patrick J. Wolf, “Do impacts on test scores even matter? Lessons from long-run outcomes in school choice research,” American Enterprise Institute, March 19, 2018, [www.aei.org/research-products/report/do-impacts-on-test-scores-even-matter-lessons-from-long-run-outcomes-in-school-choice-research/](http://www.aei.org/research-products/report/do-impacts-on-test-scores-even-matter-lessons-from-long-run-outcomes-in-school-choice-research/).