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Staying Put: The Effects of Universal School Choice on Arizona's Public Schools
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Abstract

This study evaluates the effects of Arizona's 2022 adoption of universal school choice on students who remain in traditional public schools, a group that is often overlooked in school choice research. Drawing from enrollment data from the Arizona Department of Education from the 2021–22 to 2024–25 academic years, the analysis examines public schools most affected by enrollment shifts and measures changes in staffing quality, academic performance, attendance, accountability grades, and per-pupil funding. Paired t-tests and regression models reveal a clear rise in emergency and out-of-field teachers, while chronic absenteeism fell sharply across the study period, reaching its lowest rate since the outbreak of COVID-19. State accountability grades increased, yet this three-year period did not see large gains in test performance. Per-pupil funding increased in the final year for the schools studied, but the overall fiscal context remains unclear since total funding levels were not analyzed. The findings paint a mixed picture about universal school choice's early impact on Arizona, with progress in attendance offset by persistent staffing problems and stagnant academic outcomes. While this article does not offer substantive suggestions, it highlights the need to increase scrutiny of universal school choice and emphasizes the need to reform the nation's education system as a whole.

Staying Put: The Effects of Universal School Choice on Arizona's Public Schools

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Ranked 45th in metrics for pre-K through 12th grade by U.S. News (2025) and dead last by ConsumerAffairs (2024), Arizona has consistently lagged behind much of the nation in public education for the past 3 decades (Save Our Schools, 2020). The state's students regularly post some of the lowest standardized test scores in the country, and its public schools face some of the highest levels of overcrowding (Longo, 2024). These challenges are compounded by persistently low teacher salaries, which make it difficult to recruit and retain experienced educators and place additional strain on the schools already struggling to meet rising student needs (Sikora, 2025).

In an attempt to address these issues, Arizona dramatically expanded its school voucher program in 2022, making Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) available to all families regardless of income, disability status, or location (Commonwealth Foundation, 2025). Advocates of this universal model hailed it as a landmark shift that would empower parents to choose the educational setting best suited for their children and inject competition into a system they viewed as stagnant (Merod, 2022; Suppe, 2024). By fiscal year 2024, more than 75,000 Arizona students were using vouchers, each with a median value of approximately $8,000, at a total cost of $725 million to the state. About half of this amount, or $332 million, was allocated to private institutions or homeschooling families (Suppe, 2024). At the same time, state subsidies for nonpublic education were projected to rise to $429 million in fiscal year 2025, even as budget cuts were enacted in other areas to accommodate the program's growing cost (Sievers, 2024).

For critics, this expansion represents a costly subsidization of private education that disproportionately benefits wealthier families, especially at a time when public funding is being cut in other areas to make this expensive experiment affordable (Pattison-Gordon, 2025). Opponents contend that, while affluent families can now more readily move their children to higher performing private or charter schools, students from marginalized backgrounds often lack the financial means, time, or transportation to travel to an out-of-catchment school. These students remain effectively stranded in underfunded public schools where the quality of education will only get worse due to the mass exodus prompted by school vouchers and the corresponding funding decrease, which is often tied to student headcounts (Stanford, 2025). From this perspective, universal school choice risks creating a system in which those with the greatest needs are left with the fewest resources.

Supporters, on the other hand, argue that the policy introduces much-needed competition and innovation into a failing public school system that has, for decades, been able to get away with providing subpar education with no real accountability. Advocates assert that by giving families more options, they now have genuine agency to select from a range of educational options, which should raise overall quality and provide new opportunities to students who might otherwise be locked into underperforming schools (McCluskey, 2023). According to proponents of this policy, the state's significant investment into universal school choice will pay large dividends in the long run as the injection of mass competition into the Arizona education system forces idle school districts to finally catch up to the rest of the country, prompting systemic reform and creating a rising tide among Arizonan schools that will lift all boats among public and private students (Murray-Alger, 2024).

As this debate intensifies, stakeholders from across the political spectrum are increasingly asking if, and for whom, Arizona's sweeping investment in school choice has delivered tangible educational benefits.

While many academics and experts are finding mixed results from this experiment, most of the research

conducted about school choice, especially examining Arizona's new policy, has focused on student achievement in newly funded private and charter schools. These studies examine whether those who have transferred to charter and private schools have benefitted from school choice rather than examining the plight of those who are "left behind" in the state's public schools. However, these students still make up a significant share of Arizona's youth, and understanding how universal school choice has affected their education is essential to evaluating the true impact of this policy. This study attempts to remedy this gap in knowledge by analyzing the effect of Arizona's enactment of universal school choice on those who have remained in public schools for a variety of reasons. Specifically, this study examines whether the quality of education has changed and, if so, in which direction. By doing so, it aims to contribute a more comprehensive understanding of the policy's impact and to inform future debates on how school choice might be structured to support all students in Arizona's evolving education system.

Literature Review

School choice has been shown to increase overall productivity in a limited setting, although outcomes often vary significantly by socioeconomic status (Hoxby, 2003). When faced with competition from charter and private schools, public schools not only show slightly higher student performance rates but also a tendency to "respond to competition constructively," suggesting that school choice may indeed incentivize public schools to improve their educational quality in a bid to retain students (Hoxby, 2003, p.61). Similarly, targeted voucher programs have shown promising results under specific conditions, as demonstrated by a means-tested program in Washington, DC that led to increased parental satisfaction and modest improvements in student achievement among low-income families (Kisida & Wolf, 2015). Some scholars point to these findings as evidence that, with the right design and oversight, school choice can be a tool for expanding opportunity and fairness in public education systems.

However, large-scale implementation of school choice has also raised concerns about deepening existing disparities. Some researchers argue that these programs may reinforce socioeconomic and racial segregation, particularly when wealthier families are better positioned to take advantage of choice mechanisms (Houston & Henig, 2023). Higher income families often have the means to relocate to areas with better schools or to navigate complex application systems, while lower income families may encounter barriers such as limited transportation options or lack of information (Egalite & Wolf, 2016). Consequently, studies have found that school choice tends to be most effective when a variety of high-quality public options are available, as expanded private-school choice has little beneficial effect (Vaughn & Witko, 2013).

Other scholars caution against viewing segregation as an inevitable outcome of school choice. European researchers found that segregation may be more strongly linked to residential patterns and the structure of available school options than to the choice mechanism itself when examining school choice in the Netherlands, implying that the method by which school choice is implemented and the options available to different families can significantly influence outcomes on a macro level (Boterman & Lobato, 2022). A hybrid approach, which gives parents some level of input while limiting human biases—such as principal discretion in the admissions process—may prevent the extreme stratification seen in more deregulated systems. Regardless of one's verdict on school choice, both sides agree that much of the policy's alleged disparities come from the unequal distribution of school vouchers, which is what makes Arizona's new developments so unique (Musset, 2012).

Arizona's universal program introduces a new dimension to this discussion. By offering vouchers to all families, the state presents a rare opportunity to study how school choice functions in a setting where eligibility is not restricted, allowing researchers to explore whether universal access helps to close opportunity gaps or to allow long-standing inequalities to persist or even expand.

Hypothesis

The implementation of universal school choice in Arizona has decreased the quality of education provided in Arizonan public schools as more families place their children in private and charter schools, leading to further declines in funding for public schools and a decrease in academic performance.

Methodology

To identify the public schools most affected by the adoption of universal school choice, we collected enrollment data from the Arizona Department of Education for all public Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and individual public schools during the 2022–2023 and 2024–2025 academic years (Arizona Department of Education, 2025b). The 2022–2023 school year marks the school year when universal school choice was announced and began to be implemented in Arizona, while 2024–2025 is the most recent year for which data is available. All information was collected from the Arizona Department of Education unless stated otherwise.

We calculated the percentage change in enrollment for each LEA and school across the 3-year period. Using this data, we identified the public schools and districts that experienced the most significant fluctuations in enrollment. This approach allowed us to focus our analysis on public schools that were most likely influenced by the expansion of school choice—either through substantial enrollment losses or gains—while excluding those with relatively stable enrollment trends and, therefore, relatively constant funding patterns.

To narrow our sample, we initially selected the top 60 LEAs and 150 individual schools with the highest absolute percentage changes in enrollment. We then removed all charter and online schools from the data set to isolate traditional public schools, resulting in a final sample of 37 LEAs and 44 individual public schools.

These selected cases represent the units of analysis for our study, enabling us to explore which types of public schools were most impacted by universal school choice and to what extent those schools may have been left behind in a competitive educational landscape.

Using publicly available data from the Arizona Department of Education, we analyzed seven variables at the LEA level and eight at the school level to identify statistically significant changes before and after the adoption of universal school choice. Paired *t* tests were conducted to assess changes over time, and regression analysis was used to isolate factors associated with academic performance, measured by proficiency rates in math and English language arts (ELA) on state standardized tests. When available, data were compiled from the 2021–2022 school year (prior to the policy's adoption) through the 2023–2024 school year, the most recent year for which data were available (Arizona Department of Education, 2025c).

The variables and their intended proxies are as follows:

Emergency teachers and out-of-field teachers refers to the proportion of instructors who either (a) were granted emergency teaching certificates without meeting the state's full certification requirements, or (b) were certified teachers assigned to teach subjects outside their areas of expertise. This variable serves as a proxy for both teacher quality and systemic strain, such as overcrowding or staffing shortages. Prior research has shown that students taught by noncertified or out-of-field teachers tend to experience lower educational outcomes (Dee & Cohodes, 2008). Moreover, a high proportion of such teachers often indicates difficulties in teacher recruitment and retention, especially in schools with growing student populations or limited resources. Should a school have worse resources or too many students, this proportion will likely grow.

ELA and mathematics state standardized test pass rates represent the proportion of students who scored at or above the "proficient" level on Arizona's statewide assessments. These two metrics serve as direct indicators of student achievement and, by extension, the quality of education provided by a school or LEA. Higher pass rates generally reflect stronger academic performance and more effective instruction, making them a reliable proxy for comparing educational outcomes across institutions. Following data collection and calculation, the collected proficiency rates will be compared to the state's results on the nation's report card to analyze results.

The 4-year graduation rate measures the percentage of students who successfully graduate within 4 years of entering high school. This statistic reflects a school's ability to support students through to completion and serves as a broad indicator of institutional effectiveness and student engagement.

The dropout rate represents the proportion of students who leave school without completing their high-school education. High dropout rates may signal underlying issues such as poor academic support, lack of student resources, or disengagement from school culture. Together, these last two metrics provide insight into long-term educational attainment and the effectiveness of school environments in retaining and graduating students. However, these metrics are not measured in elementary schools, and because most schools that experienced

significant enrollment fluctuations were elementary schools, the two metrics are excluded from individual-level analysis due to insufficient sample size.

Chronic absenteeism refers to students in grades 1 through 8 who miss more than 10% of the school year, according to the State of Arizona (Read On Arizona, 2024). In a standard 180-day calendar, this means exceeding 18 days of absence. Chronic absenteeism is a key proxy for student disengagement and often signals broader systemic challenges, such as transportation barriers or dissatisfaction with the school environment. Consistently high absenteeism disrupts instructional time and is strongly associated with lower academic achievement and long-term educational setbacks, as each day out of the classroom represents lost learning opportunities.

State accountability A–F letter grades reflect the annual performance of each public school in Arizona. Each school receives a percentage score and a corresponding letter grade, from "A" through "F," based on the statewide accountability system. These grades aim to capture overall school performance using a mix of indicators, including student proficiency in English language arts, math, and science as well as year-over-year academic growth. For high schools, the system also factors in graduation rates, improvements in those rates, and whether students are on track for college or career readiness. Each component is weighted and combined into a total score, which is then converted into a letter grade using distinct cutoffs for elementary and high schools. Because this system is standardized across the state, it provides a consistent framework for comparing performance between schools. While the letter grade simplifies multiple performance factors into a single metric, it still reflects both achievement and growth, making it a helpful tool for identifying shifts in school quality over time. In this study, we use these grades as a way to assess how individual schools may have been affected by the implementation of universal school choice. Since these grades are only assigned to individual schools (not districts), they are only used in our analysis of school-level data.

Public funding per student was collected through another Arizona Department of Education portal separate from school report cards (Arizona Department of Education, 2025d). Data were gathered with attention to how each district's funding compared to both the statewide average and the average within its designated operational peer group. Arizona assigns each school district to one of 12 operational peer groups based on district size, type (elementary vs. unified/union high school), and location (urban/suburban vs. rural/town). These peer groups are intended to facilitate more equitable and meaningful comparisons of spending on categories such as administration, plant operations, and food services. While absolute funding levels can vary widely, they often require further context to interpret. For example, rural districts often face higher per-pupil costs due to geographic isolation and limited economies of scale, while larger urban districts may benefit from cost efficiencies but still struggle with concentrated poverty or aging infrastructure. Therefore, comparing raw funding levels across dissimilar districts may be misleading; instead, this study emphasizes changes in per-pupil funding over time within each district. Shifts in funding—especially in response to enrollment changes—are more meaningful indicators of how public resources are being reallocated in the context of universal school choice. For instance, a sudden decline in enrollment without an immediate adjustment in funding could temporarily increase per-pupil expenditures, whereas consistent enrollment loss followed by budget cuts may indicate fiscal strain and reduced service capacity. These trends help reveal whether districts are experiencing increased investment, retrenchment, or instability as a result of school-choice policies.

Quantitative Results

Partial and incomplete data points, when information is not available for all years of measurement, were eliminated in order to prevent skewing of data. To identify which variables experienced statistically significant changes over the 3-year observation period (2021–2022 through 2023–2024), a series of paired *t* tests were conducted in Stata at a significance level of 0.05. Significant changes were recorded for the comparisons in Table 1 using the labels "A" for changes between 2021–2022 and 2022–2023, "B" for the change between 2022–2023 and 2023–2024, and "C" for the overall trend between 2021–2022 and 2023–2024.

Table 1

Table Title

LEA-Level Variables	Model A	Model B	Model C	School-Level Variables	Model A	Model B	Model C
Proportion of emergency and out-of-field teachers	increased	increased	increased	Proportion of emergency and out-of-field teachers	increased		increased
Proficiency rate for state ELA test	increased			Chronic absenteeism rate	decreased	decreased	decreased
Proficiency rate for state math test	increased	decreased		Average grade level	increased		increased
Dropout rate	increased	decreased					
Chronic absenteeism rate	decreased	decreased	decreased				
Change in raw funds		increased	increased				
Change in funding relative to peer schools	decreased	increased	increased				

The data set includes *t* statistics and *p* values at multiple levels of analysis. The following key defines how to interpret variable codes and their time suffixes in Table 2 and Table 3:

- Timing suffixes:
  - (varname)a_(varname)b: the change in the variable between period A (2021–2022) and period B (2022–2023)
  - (varname)b_(varname)c: the change between period B (2022–2023) and period C (2023–2024)
  - (varname)a_(varname)c: the overall change between 2021–2022 and 2023–2024
- Variables:
  - emer: proportion of emergency or out-of-field teachers
  - ela: proportion of students achieving proficiency or higher on the Arizona state English Language Arts assessment
  - math: proportion of students achieving proficiency or higher on the Arizona state mathematics assessment
  - grad: graduation rate
  - drop: dropout rate
  - absent: chronic absenteeism rate
  - fund: total funding per student
  - peer: mean funding per student for a Local Education Agency (LEA) peer category (as defined by the state)
  - pfa (LEA)/fp (school district): change in the ratio of funding relative to peer districts (LEA funds divided by peer funds)
  - state: mean funding per student across the state of Arizona
  - sfa (LEA)/fs (school district): change in the ratio of funding relative to statewide funds (LEA funds divided by state funds)
  - grade: state accountability grade

Each cell in Table 4 reports the estimated change in test score proficiency associated with a one percent increase in the corresponding independent variable, holding all other variables constant.

Table 2

LEA-Level Paired T-Test Results

	testname	tstat	pval
1.	emera_emerb	-4.2289553	.00015374
2.	emerb_emerc	-4.8617215	.00002291
3.	emera_emerc	-6.1699692	4.122e-07
4.	elaa_elab	-2.6777417	.01109515
5.	elab_elac	-.08619053	.93179256
6.	elaa_elac	-1.7587928	.08711127
7.	matha_mathb	-2.6826855	.01095988
8.	mathb_mathc	3.0611461	.00415269
9.	matha_mathc	.11507648	.90902398
10.	grada_gradb	-1.3920169	.17783095
11.	gradb_gradc	-.96979416	.34269111
12.	grada_gradc	-1.610985	.12143856
13.	dropa_dropb	-3.1095765	.0076848
14.	dropb_dropc	2.8393599	.01312239
15.	dropa_dropc	.6244139	.54239829
16.	absenta_absentb	3.1450741	.00337914
17.	absentb_absentc	5.776559	1.521e-06
18.	absenta_absentc	6.5687728	1.386e-07
19.	funda_fundb	.05532532	.95618521
20.	fundb_fundc	-3.5841003	.00099452
21.	funda_fundc	-3.9096337	.00039213
22.	peera_peerb	2.5710526	.01441764
23.	peerb_peerc	-14.785471	7.239e-17
24.	peera_peerc	-18.188686	9.887e-20
25.	pfa_pfb	-1.3436671	.18746445
26.	pfb_pfc	.80139522	.42816093
27.	pfa_pfc	-.58240946	.56392111
28.	statea_stateb	.	.
29.	stateb_statec	.	.
30.	statea_statec	.	.
31.	sfa_sfb	-1.1615139	.25307651
32.	sfb_sfc	1.3560581	.18352598
33.	sfa_sfc	.24126888	.81071566

Table 3

School District-Level Paired T-Test Results

	testname	tstat	pval
1.	emera_emerb	-2.6572713	.01126507
2.	emerb_emerc	-.85306416	.39870323
3.	emera_emerc	-3.2190375	.002553
4.	elaa_elab	-1.4105555	.16833208
5.	elab_elac	-.37329049	.71147285
6.	elaa_elac	-1.2850996	.20827642
7.	matha_mathb	-1.3425858	.18982177
8.	mathb_mathc	1.110079	.27608518
9.	matha_mathc	-.18842613	.85185501
10.	grada_gradb	-1.07363	.34344125
11.	gradb_gradc	.63029629	.56271513
12.	grada_gradc	-1.0021017	.37299961
13.	dropa_dropb	-.17139918	.87223136
14.	dropb_dropc	.52812385	.62535502
15.	dropa_dropc	1.0257375	.3629929
16.	absenta_absentb	3.1722911	.00299066
17.	absentb_absentc	2.498316	.01692214
18.	absenta_absentc	4.6513679	.0000392
19.	gradea_gradeb	-2.4022138	.02190465
20.	gradeb_gradec	-.27479625	.78513573
21.	gradea_gradec	-3.4879247	.00136548
22.	funda_fundc	-1.3723827	.17979332
23.	peera_peerc	-1.1316482	.26646074
24.	fpa_fpc	-.84682788	.40358136
25.	statea_statec	.	.
26.	fsa_fsc	1.0973405	.27939772

Table 4
LEA Regression Results

LEA REGRESSION VARIABLES	(1) MATH	(2) ELA
Unqualified Teachers	-0.385***	-0.423***
	(0.103)	(0.098)
Chronic Absenteeism	-0.712***	-0.716***
	(0.010)	(0.095)
Funding per Student	-0.001	-0.001
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Proportion of Funds Relative to Peers	28.065***	25.571***
	(4.454)	(4.245)
Proportion of Funds Relative to State	-17.147**	-17.274**
	(5.741)	(5.471)
Constant	56.246***	63.598***
Observations	108	108
Adjusted R-squared	0.602	0.624

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Interpretation of Results

The most consistent trend across both levels of analysis was a significant and sustained increase in the proportion of emergency and out-of-field teachers over the 3-year period. Across the LEA sample size, this rate rose from an average of 12.91% of unqualified teachers leading the classroom in 2021-2022 to a whopping 19.33% of educators lacking qualifications in the 2023-2024 school year. At the individual school level, this increase was even more pronounced. Despite the change between 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 being insignificant, rates rose from 14.80 percent in 2021–2022 to 19.17 percent in 2022–2023, reaching 20.61 percent in 2023–2024. This rise likely reflects growing instability within the teaching profession in Arizona, where budget uncertainty and heightened competition from higher paying private-sector roles are intensifying an already serious statewide teacher shortage, forcing schools to rely on temporary or underprepared educators to keep classes running. As public school enrollment numbers continue to decline, funding will continue falling and certain districts will be forced to lay off teachers in response, creating a feedback loop that further undermines staffing quality and disincentivizes prospective teachers from entering or remaining in the Arizona public school system.

Despite these staffing challenges, standardized test scores at the LEA level showed a modest overall increase during the observation period, with ELA and math pass rates jumping from 34.84% and 28.95% in 2021-2022 to 35.54% and 29.76% in 2022-2023. However, math proficiency rates declined slightly to 29.89% in 2023–2024, while ELA scores remained relatively stable. Individual schools faced a similar pattern in test scores, with a temporary spike in math scores and a sustained, albeit modest, increase in ELA scores. However, these changes at the school level were not statistically significant. Overall, the change in standardized test scores was negligible, even where it reached statistical significance. This finding suggests that educational quality likely did not change in a substantial way after the adoption of universal school choice, contrary to what the high proportion of emergency and out-of-field teachers might imply.

Interestingly, it is worth noting that these metrics fall below the 2022-2023 statewide pass rate of 40% and 34% for ELA and math tests and that every single one of Arizona's fourth- and eighth-grade math and reading scores failed to increase on the National Assessment of Education Progress achievement-level percentages, with both eighth grade scores falling to their lowest point in 2 decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025).

Arizona continues to lag behind the rest of the country, and these trends suggest that while test scores have not plummeted off a cliff, like some opponents of universal school choice have been fearing, neither have standardized scores increased, as was the hope from this expensive experiment. Universal school choice has not demonstrated the ability to close the persistent achievement gap that leaves many public schools disadvantaged compared to private institutions and Arizona, as a whole, trailing behind the other 49 states (National Center for Education Statistics, 2025).

Dropout and graduation rates fell below the $n = 30$ requirement needed to assume an approximately normal distribution and were, therefore, excluded from interpretation due to insufficient sample size.

Perhaps most interestingly, chronic absenteeism decreased significantly across each time period for both LEA and school sample sizes, declining from 32.65% in 2021-2022, to 28.53% and then 24.78% in the following 2 years for LEAs. Once again, findings showed a more pronounced decrease on the individual school scale, with chronic absenteeism rates dropping from 36.70% in 2021-2022 to 30.68% in 2022-2023 and 26.35% in 2023-2024. While this may simply represent a return to preCOVID-era rates (chronic absenteeism ranged between 12–14% in the 3 full school years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic), it could also mean that children who had been chronically absent were either attending school more regularly or had transferred to charter schools that were closer by or a better fit for their student needs (Arizona Department of Education, 2025a). Yet improved attendance did not correspond with substantial gains in academic achievement, underscoring the likelihood that deeper instructional or organizational challenges are limiting the effectiveness of these efforts. Further research is recommended on this fascinating topic.

This study also tracked the variation in state accountability ratings for individual schools. Across the 3 tracked years, scores rose from 73.85% in 2021-2022 to 78.72% and 79.19% in the following 2 years, respectively. While only the jump from 2021-2022 to 2022-2023 and the overall increase from 2021-2022 to 2023-2024 were significant (the change over the second and third years was not significant), this rise in scores indicates either that students are advancing on paper, even as test scores stagnate or decline, or that Arizona's accountability grading system is broken and inaccurate.

Funding patterns showed that although funding per student remained almost identical between 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, it rose by 27% the following year. Notably, the data set does not include raw funding devoted to each school or district, so it is impossible to fully understand the implications of this shift in context. However, the proportion of per-student funding to peer districts remained at around 115% for the sample set, implying that this shift was replicated in the wider population of LEAs. Regardless, it is worth noting this jump, as it highlights how LEAs are facing a new economic reality with funding. Further research is required to determine exactly what this new reality looks like.

Using math and ELA pass rates as dependent variables for LEA measurement, we used regression analysis to isolate which factors most strongly predicted academic outcomes. We did not conduct regression analysis for individual schools due to too much incomplete data across the data set.

Confirming our initial findings, the regression analysis demonstrated the extremely strong and statistically significant negative correlation of standardized test scores with higher rates of emergency and out-of-field teachers in addition to chronic absenteeism. Interestingly, funding per student did not show a significant direct effect on pass rates, but the proportion of funds per student that an LEA received compared to peer districts had a large impact on student achievement, with a 1% increase in relative funding compared to peers providing a 0.28-point increase in math scores and a 0.25-point increase in ELA scores. Conversely, relative funds compared to the state average showed a negative correlation with standardized test scores. This pattern may indicate that while outperforming peer districts in resource allocation can translate to better outcomes, higher relative funding compared to statewide averages might be linked to larger shortcomings that require greater financial attention.

Overall, the regression findings reinforce the descriptive results by showing that staffing quality and attendance are among the strongest predictors of achievement at the LEA level while simple increases in funding are not necessarily sufficient to drive improvement. This supports the conclusion that, in the context of universal school choice, the public schools left behind may face persistent barriers rooted not just in resources but also in

human capital and student engagement, both of which require targeted and sustained intervention.

Future Research and Study Limitations

Because universal school choice is still in its early stages, it is too soon to make definitive claims about the policy's effectiveness. Perhaps the outcomes of this policy reform will take longer to materialize, or perhaps the policy has already shown its true colors in directing disproportionate harms onto lower income families. Future research should, therefore, revisit this question with a longer time horizon. The data currently available are shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, which complicates causal inference and raises the possibility that some outcomes reflect pandemic recovery rather than the policy shift itself. However, simply using nonCOVID years is also unfeasible due to its nonmarginal distance from the actual policy change, with the most recent data set unaffected by COVID coming from 2018–2019 (4 entire years before the policy was enacted). The pandemic thus introduces an unavoidable limitation, and only the passage of time and the accumulation of additional post-policy data will allow for a clearer assessment of the reform's effects.

Another important limitation concerns Arizona's preexisting socioeconomic landscape, which may magnify the policy's consequences in ways not easily generalizable to other contexts. The state ranks 42nd nationally in wealth disparities between racial and ethnic groups and last in public-education quality, and these structural disadvantages likely exacerbate issues found in the data such as teacher shortages, declining teacher quality, and limited fiscal capacity to offer competitive salaries (ABC15 Arizona in Phoenix, 2025). These challenges may be further intensified by the capital flight from public school districts as higher income families transition to private institutions, suggesting that the effects observed in Arizona may reflect the intersection of school choice with already high levels of inequality rather than solely the policy itself. Comparative analysis across states with different socioeconomic profiles will, therefore, be essential in order to determine whether these findings hold in broader contexts. Because of Arizona's unique educational context, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions about how universal school choice would play out in other states. Arizona was the first state to enact such a policy, and many others are still in the process of transitioning, which means the jury is still out on the broader implications. At this stage, there has simply not been enough time to evaluate whether the patterns observed in Arizona represent generalizable outcomes or are the product of the state's particular social and economic conditions.

In addition to per-pupil measures, future research should also examine raw funding totals, as both forms of data provide distinct insights into the fiscal consequences of universal school choice. Per-capita figures are useful for capturing the resources available to individual students but can obscure the effects of large enrollment shifts, while raw funding totals reveal the overall fiscal health and capacity of school systems facing population movements. Considering both metrics together will offer a more complete understanding of how school-choice policies reshape the financial landscape of public education.

In addition to expanding the data set in future studies, researchers must also examine the causal link between variables identified as statistically significant and actual changes in educational outcomes. While such an analysis is beyond the scope of this study, it remains unclear whether decreases in chronic absenteeism meaningfully improve student learning or if rising school-accountability grades correspond to genuine improvements within classrooms. Establishing this causal connection is essential, as without it, we cannot determine whether the observed trends reflect substantive progress or risk directing attention toward indicators that fail to capture meaningful educational change.

Conclusion

Universal school choice is not the panacea that supporters were hoping it may be, but it also is not exacerbating the worst of what opponents feared it might bring to Arizona's public school system. While overall test scores remained stable and some improvements occurred in ELA scores, these outcomes do not eliminate concerns about staffing quality and instructional consistency, especially in regard to the worsening teacher shortage that is leaving public schools struggling to find enough qualified teachers for their pupils. Chronic

absenteeism rates fell drastically during the study period, yet they remain higher than prepandemic levels and have not translated into measurable gains in student achievement.

State accountability ratings rose, but the lack of corresponding gains on national assessments shows that the state still has a long way to go to catch up with the rest of the country. Although raw funding per pupil rose over the analyzed period, total funding levels were not fully examined, and the study did not find a direct, statistically significant effect of increased funding alone on standardized test scores. Nevertheless, when relative funding was measured against peer districts, greater resources were associated with improved student outcomes, a finding that contrasts sharply with the negative correlation observed when funding was compared to the statewide average.

Taken together, these findings depict a system undergoing sweeping structural change without achieving meaningful academic recovery. In light of these modest outcomes and the substantial fiscal cost of universal school choice, it becomes increasingly difficult to defend the policy on results alone. While further research may clarify its long-term effects, the present evidence does not justify complacency. The central takeaway is straightforward: policymakers cannot rely on universal school choice as a self-executing reform, and if Arizona intends to reverse stagnating achievement and stabilize its public education system, it must pursue additional, targeted interventions now rather than waiting for improvement to materialize on its own—especially if future data reveal a lack of positive outcomes for the state.

Have the benefits of universal school choice justified its immense price tag? Maybe so, or maybe not. That is not this study's place to decide. What this study does highlight are the glaring holes in Arizona's public education system that still require significant attention. Supporters of school choice must be willing to refine the policy, and opponents must be willing to work within its reality. Waiting for perfect research while learning loss persists is, itself, a policy decision, and it is one Arizona cannot afford. While lawmakers and advocates await additional academic research on the empirical effects of universal school choice, they should continue advancing results-oriented policies that confront the state's learning crisis, particularly at a time when the education gap between the United States and other nations, both allied and adversarial, continues to widen.

The challenges the state faces are real and complex, and as shown throughout this study, no single solution will provide all the answers. All stakeholders must work together to develop policies that address the mass exodus of educators into the private sector and out of the state as well as lagging test scores so that one day, neither public schools nor the state will be left behind in the broader landscape of American education. Whether the solution involves universal school choice is still unclear, but it is evident that more needs to be done.

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