



# 2023 Education Freedom Report Card

STATE RANKINGS  
FOR PARENTS

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# 2023 STATE RANKINGS FOR PARENTS

STATE	OVERALL	EDUCATION CHOICE	TRANSPARENCY	TEACHER FREEDOM	RETURN ON INVESTMENT
Alabama	▲13	18	15	18	6
Alaska	▲41	42	28	31	46
Arizona	2	1	4	5	12
Arkansas	▲4	6	10	10	18
California	▲26	40	5	43	22
Colorado	▲28	35	33	20	20
Connecticut	▼50	33	43	44	51
Delaware	▼44	39	39	50	23
District of Columbia	▲40	20	50	46	48
Florida	1	2	1	2	5
Georgia	▲12	16	13	14	15
Hawaii	▲33	51	32	3	21
Idaho	▼11	29	8	23	1
Illinois	▲32	34	38	21	36
Indiana	▼5	3	14	25	31
Iowa	▲9	4	16	30	25
Kansas	▲31	23	35	41	27
Kentucky	▼37	43	20	22	45
Louisiana	▼18	25	26	4	13
Maine	▼35	27	49	15-t	44
Maryland	▲38	36	40	38	33
Massachusetts	47	50	34	33	29
Michigan	27	28	11	35	30
Minnesota	▼45	45	29	45	38
Mississippi	6	13	31	1	16
Missouri	▲15	11	46	7	17
Montana	▼17	10	6	37	26
Nebraska	▲25	22	21	36	19
Nevada	▲23	24	19	42	3
New Hampshire	19	9	18	9	43
New Jersey	▲42	32	41	32	49
New Mexico	▼39	41	45	29	37
New York	▲48	49	44	24	40
North Carolina	▲14	19	17	12	9
North Dakota	▼36	48	22	15-t	35
Ohio	▲29	12	37	47	47
Oklahoma	▲10	5	42	8	24
Oregon	▼51	46	25	51	39
Pennsylvania	▲30	21	24	34	42
Rhode Island	▼49	38	51	48	28
South Carolina	▲16	15	30	11	14
South Dakota	▼21	31	7	39	7
Tennessee	▲7	17	12	13	4
Texas	▲8	30	3	6	11
Utah	▲3	8	9	19	2
Vermont	▼46	26	47	28	50
Virginia	▼22	37	2	26	32
Washington	43	47	36	49	8
West Virginia	▼20	7	27	27	34
Wisconsin	▲24	14	48	40	10
Wyoming	▼34	44	23	15-t	41

t = tied with another state

# 2023 Education Freedom Report Card

## STATE RANKINGS FOR PARENTS

Americans are trying to put the pandemic behind them, but parents and students in K-12 schools are now seeing the effects of prolonged school closures: Student achievement has plummeted to historic lows. Meanwhile, education special interest groups are doubling down on their plan to limit parents' influence on their children's educations. This endeavor is a lingering reminder of the COVID-19 years, as it was during this period that parents began to uncover the radical agenda that special interest groups were executing in classrooms.

Education remains a top priority for millions of American families, and parents should be empowered to choose a safe and effective education for their children. In its continuing efforts to help every child to achieve the American Dream, The Heritage Foundation has released the second edition of its *Education Freedom Report Card* to promote education freedom in each state.

The report card measures four categories (Education Choice, Teacher Freedom, Transparency, and Return on Investment) that encompass more than two dozen discrete factors.

In this 2023 edition of the Education Freedom Report Card, Florida remains the top-ranked state across the board. Florida lawmakers have once again expanded education freedom and promoted parents' rights while creating a laudable return on investment for taxpayers.

The Heritage Foundation is also pleased to recognize the states that made the most significant gains since last year, beginning with Iowa. This year, state lawmakers adopted education savings account-style options that are available to

every child in the state, as well as a parent bill of rights. Both reforms empower parents to help their children succeed.

Arkansas also made remarkable improvements in the rankings, moving up from 13th to fourth place overall. Every parent in Arkansas is eligible to apply for the new education savings account that Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders (R) signed into law.

At the other end of the spectrum, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Oregon came in 49th, 50th, and 51st, respectively, doing little to provide transparency and choice for families. The Heritage Foundation’s Center for Education Policy continues to set high standards in the report card for achieving and maintaining education freedom in the states. Heritage’s goal is that this annual ranking of states not only inform parents and policymakers of what their states do well and where they need improvement, but to inspire changes that give all students the chance to succeed in school and in life.

Overall, we identified four broad categories that encompass more than two dozen discrete factors as essential to promoting freedom for families in education:

## 1. EDUCATION CHOICE

States with more education choice have more educational liberty. “Education Choice” has five sub-categories: Private School Choice, Private-School-Choice Program Design, Charter Schools, Homeschooling, and Public School Choice.

### Private School Choice

The following are components of the Private School Choice variable:

**Education savings accounts (ESAs).** This variable contains three binary measures of whether a state offers an ESA or ESA-style policy. These include state-funded ESAs and tax-credit-funded ESAs and ESA-style policies. ESAs are the future of education liberty, and they are a key measure of whether states are giving parents the freedom to customize their children’s education, not just to choose their school.

**Proportion of eligible students.** This variable is a measure of the proportion of all K–12 students in the state who are eligible for a private-school-choice program. Private-school-choice programs include school vouchers, ESAs, and tax-credit scholarships. We did not include individual tax credits and deductions.

**Proportion of students who participate.** This variable is a measure of the proportion of all K–12 students in the state who are participating in a private-school-choice program. Private-school-choice programs include school





vouchers, ESAs, and tax-credit scholarships. We did not include individual tax credits and deductions.

## Private-School Choice Program Design

This variable indicates whether states have a private school choice program that impose burdensome regulations, such as requiring participating private schools to administer the state’s standardized assessment or a nationally norm-referenced assessment; to replace their admissions policies with open enrollment and a lottery for oversubscription; to accept the voucher or scholarship as the full value of tuition; and/or to have accreditation from a state, regional, or national accrediting body and/or to conduct an approved standardized test. These regulations restrict the freedom of private schools to create the learning communities that families desire.

## Charter Schools

Following are the indicators that comprise the Charter Schools variable:

**Proportion of public schools that are charter schools.** Charter schools sever the tie between ZIP code and school, providing more options and freedom for parents to choose the most appropriate education for their child.

**Charter school law rating.** This variable is a rating of the quality of a state’s charter school law from the Center for Education Reform’s (CER’s) 2022 National Charter School Law Rankings & Scorecard. As the CER states, “[C]harter school success depends on the policy environments in which charter schools operate,” and “overregulation and underfunding force charters to behave as district schools by another name.”

**Educational Freedom Institute (EFI) charter ecosystem ranking.** This variable measures the quality of the charter school ecosystem in each state from the Educational Freedom Institute’s 2022 Charter School Ecosystem Rankings. This report is a continuous variable of the raw score calculated by the EFI authors that considers access to charter schools, growth in charter schools, and growth in achievement outcomes, among other factors.

## Homeschooling

Following are the indicators that comprise the Homeschooling variable:

**Percentage of homeschooled students.** This variable is calculated as a proportion between 0 and 1 where the numerator is the adjusted number of homeschooled K–12 students, and the denominator is the total number of public, private, and homeschooled K–12 students in the state.

**Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) rating (ranking of state homeschool laws).** This variable measures the quality of state homeschool laws as compiled by the HSLDA. Less regulation in the homeschooling

process means that parents have more freedom to customize their children's education. More regulations, such as mandatory testing and curriculum, limit education freedom.

## Public School Choice

The following are indicators that comprise the Public School Choice variable:

**Open-enrollment policy.** The 2022 report titled *Public Schools Without Boundaries: Ranking Every State's K–12 Open Enrollment Policies* from the Reason Foundation documents whether states have mandatory intra-district enrollment and/or mandatory inter-district enrollment, transparent reporting by the state education agency, reporting of school-level capacity, and whether district schools charge tuition to out-of-district students. Open enrollment policies allow families to choose public schools beyond the one assigned to their ZIP code. While not as impactful as private-school-choice programs, allowing students to attend other public schools injects more accountability into schools and gives families more options.

**Students per district.** This variable measures the number of K–12 public school students per public school district in each state. Larger, more consolidated, districts reduce parental control over how and where their child is educated.

**Square miles per district.** This variable measures the number of square miles of land mass per K–12 public school district in each state. Larger, more consolidated districts reduce parents' control over how and where their children are educated.

## 2. TEACHER FREEDOM

The burden of regulation on education providers limits the innovative options they can provide. An education environment of low regulation would maximize options and allow parents to choose the best education for their children. Within “Teacher Freedom,” there are three sub-categories and variables: Barriers to Teaching, Chief Diversity Officers, and Common Core Testing Requirement.

### Barriers to Teaching

The following are indicators that comprise the Barriers to Teaching variable:

**Proportion of alternative-certified teachers.** This variable measures the proportion of new teachers who are certified through alternative pathways. Traditional teacher licensing is a major barrier to entering the teaching profession. States that allow many paths to certification have more options for good teachers to get jobs.





**Full reciprocity for out-of-state teachers.** This variable is a measure of whether a state has a statute that grants full reciprocity to teachers who complete their certification in other states.

### Chief Diversity Officers

This variable measures the proportion of school districts in the state with 15,000 students or more that have a chief diversity officer (CDO). As Jay Greene and James Paul point out in their study, CDOs “may be best understood as political activists who articulate and enforce an ideological orthodoxy within school districts.” CDOs likely limit academic freedom in the classroom.

### Common Core Testing Requirement

This binary variable captures whether a state administers either the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) or the Smarter Balanced Common Core exam. Standardized testing lowers standards and homogeneity in education options. Families in states that do not administer a Common Core exam have more curricular options and, therefore, more education liberty.

## 3. TRANSPARENCY

Transparency in the education system gives parents information to make the best decisions about their children’s education. “Transparency” has three subcategories: Strong Critical Race Theory Law, Parental Empowerment, and Accountability.

### Strong Law Protecting Students from Critical Race Theory

This variable indicates whether a state has a provision reaffirming that compelled speech is unconstitutional and/or stating that violations of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in K–12 schools are illegal.

### Parental Empowerment

The Parental Empowerment variable includes the following four indicators:

**Parental organizations per pupil.** This variable is a count of the number of grassroots parent organizations in each state as defined by the Parents Defending Education IndoctriNation Map. Parents care deeply about the education of their children and the better organized they are, the more influence they can have on policy, supporting changes that increase education liberty.

**Indoctrination incidents per pupil.** This variable is a count of the number of incidents of indoctrination in each state as defined by the Parents Defending Education IndoctriNation Map. Examples of indoctrination include: “Santa

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# TOP 5

- #1 Florida
- #2 Arizona
- #3 Utah
- #4 Arkansas
- #5 Indiana

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# BOTTOM 5

- #47 Massachusetts
- #48 New York
- #49 Rhode Island
- #50 Connecticut
- #51 Oregon

Barbara Unified School District teacher exposes highly racialized and political curriculum that is being withheld from parents.”

**Given Name Act.** This variable is an indicator of whether a state has adopted the provisions, either through legislation, executive order, or guidelines adopted by a state agency that requires school personnel to obtain parental consent before addressing a child by a name or pronoun that does not correspond to the information on a child’s birth certificate.

**Parents’ bill of rights.** This variable is an indicator of whether state lawmakers have adopted a parents’ bill of rights.

## Accountability

The Accountability variable is comprised of the following four indicators:

**Parent access to curricula and materials.** This variable indicates whether a state has a policy that clearly states that parents must be allowed access to their child’s curricula and learning materials. Increased transparency of curricula and lesson plans gives parents information to make the best decisions about the education of their children.

**Public comment in school board meetings.** This variable indicates whether a state has a requirement to allow public comment at school board meetings. While the freedom of exit encourages the greatest accountability to parents, the ability to communicate with one’s community at local school board meetings is a valuable indicator of transparency.

**Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) law rating.** This variable is a rating of the state FOIA laws, which captures the ability of the public to access information about their public school system. Rating criteria include response type, response time, costs, and contact ease. Easier access to information about their public schools gives parents knowledge about their education options.

**School board election cycle.** This variable indicates whether states hold school board elections on cycle with the general election. Teachers’ unions often lobby for off-cycle elections so that they can ensure a larger turnout from their members. This makes it more likely that union-friendly school board members are elected.

## 4. RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Education liberty includes the freedom of taxpayers to keep more of their money. Private school choice programs also tend to spend less money for the same or better outcomes. “Return on Investment” has four subcategories and variables:

Per-Pupil Spending, NAEP Point per Dollar Spent, Teacher-to-Non-Teacher Ratio, and Unfunded Pension Liability.

## Per-Pupil Spending

The Per-Pupil-Spending variable is comprised of the following two indicators:

**Nominal per-pupil spending.** This variable measures the average K–12 spending per pupil in each state. These data represent the total current expenditures, capital expenditures, and interest on school debt per pupil.

**Cost-of-living-adjusted per-pupil spending.** This variable takes the nominal per-pupil spending variable and adjusts it for differences in cost of living by state. To calculate the cost-of-living-adjusted per-pupil spending, Heritage researchers multiplied the nominal per-pupil spending variable by the regional price parities by state for 2018 from the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

## NAEP Point per Dollar Spent

This variable measures return on investment in terms of academic achievement for the investment in terms of spending per pupil. This was calculated based on the average scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) for fourth-grade and eighth-grade reading and math.

## Teacher-to-Non-Teacher Ratio

Much of the K–12 public school spending has resulted in more school administrators, not investments in teachers and resources to improve education quality.

## Unfunded Pension Liabilities

This variable measures the unfunded pension liability as a percentage of state gross domestic product. In many states, unfunded pension liabilities are a burden on taxpayers and economic growth. They also represent a concentration of teacher union power as well as deficient political leaders who make decisions about public education.

For more information on methodology, go to: [Heritage.org/EducationReportCard](https://Heritage.org/EducationReportCard)

## MOST IMPROVED

### Iowa

Iowa made the biggest leap in overall education freedom this year, from #22 overall to #9. Most notably, Iowa climbed 17 spots in the transparency category.

Iowa ranks #4 for education choice, up five spots from 2022. Iowa does exceptionally well in empowering families to choose among private schools and district schools, as well as other learning environments. This year, Iowa enacted a K-12 education savings account (ESA)-style policy that will be available to all families within three years. Additionally, Iowa respects the autonomy of home-schooling families. Iowa could improve its ranking by allowing families to use the ESAs without having to enroll in a private school, making it easier for charter schools to open and operate, and giving families a choice of traditional public schools beyond their assigned school.

Iowa ranks #16 in transparency, skyrocketing up 17 spots in the past year. In 2023, Governor Kim Reynolds (R) signed a proposal creating a parent bill of rights. The law affirms parental rights to make decisions on education, extracurricular activities, medical care and moral and religious upbringing.

Gov. Reynolds also signed a law that says school officials may not address a child “using a name or pronoun that is different than the name or pronoun assigned to the student in the school district’s registration forms or records” without notifying parents. (Gov. Reynold’s signature occurred after the cut-off date for the data gathering on this report, so Iowa’s score change will be reflected in next year’s report.)





Iowa lawmakers have adopted a provision that prohibits the use of the racist ideas that are inseparable from critical race theory. But the provision also may prohibit certain instructional content and does not address the important issues of academic transparency and prohibiting compelled speech.

Iowa can continue its upward progress with additional attention to two additional areas of education freedom: it ranks 30th in teacher freedom and 25th in return on investment (ROI) for education spending among states. Iowa can improve its teacher freedom ranking by significantly increasing the number of aspiring teachers who have access to alternative teacher certification options, or ending certification requirements altogether, allowing full reciprocity of teacher licensure, and stopping the growth of non-teaching administrative staff, such as chief diversity officers. Iowa can improve its ROI ranking by lowering per-pupil spending, stopping growth in non-teaching staff, and lowering its unfunded teacher pension liabilities.

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**MOST IMPROVED**  
**Iowa: #9**

 SCHOOL CHOICE RANK	<b>#4</b>
 TRANSPARENCY RANK	<b>#16</b>
 REGULATION RANK	<b>#30</b>
 SPENDING RANK	<b>#25</b>



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