

The School Choice Idea in Rhode Island

Myths, Opinions, and Realities

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Introduction

The public policy debate about school choice — about allowing Rhode Island’s children and their families the freedom to determine what educational approach best suits their needs — is coming to the Ocean State in a big way. As the public, the news media, and elected representatives begin the conversation, it is important that they start from a foundation of facts. The RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity therefore enters into the initial discussion:

- A review of some of the common myths about school choice
- A state-specific analysis of results from an opinion poll conducted in cooperation with the Friedman Foundation

The poll data shows that Rhode Islanders are displeased with the state of their education system and, more importantly, support reform policies strongly when they are explained. Advocates for school choice should therefore be encouraged that many of the detractors’ arguments are myths.

Myths About School Choice

Myth 1: School choice will hurt state and local budgets and drain funds from public schools.

From the outset, some people take it as obvious that allowing public education funds to follow children to any sort of alternative from government-run schools would take money away from the education system. This is false in both broad and narrow terms.

The public policy debate about school choice — about allowing Rhode Island’s children and their families the freedom to determine what educational approach best suits their needs — is coming to the Ocean State in a big way.

Broadly speaking, we should think of “public education” as the entire system by which Rhode Island ensures that its children are well educated. Allowing families to use some public resources toward their own children’s education would create incentive for them to increase the amount of their own money that they spend for that purpose, in order to capture what the government makes available. For example, parents might find a way to afford \$4,000 of their own money in order to capture a \$2,000 public scholarship to be put toward \$6,000 tuition at an alternative school that they had previously considered unaffordable.

School choice would also create incentive for efficiencies within the education system. Studies repeatedly find that charter schools (which are a school choice option within the government-education system) operate more efficiently, achieving the same results for less money.¹ Efficiency frees up money for activities that otherwise would have required additional funds.

Narrowly speaking, even taking a view entirely within the government-school system, school choice policies that do not redirect the entire annual marginal cost of a student's in-district education will save Rhode Island money. For example, if it costs an additional \$8,000 to educate a student and a \$3,000 scholarship is offered, taxpayers save \$5,000 for each student who utilizes it. A research study conducted by Susan Aud and published by the Friedman Foundation in 2007 showed that no school choice program in the United States from 1990 to 2006 resulted in a fiscal loss for the relevant state. Most school choice programs save the state money.²

Myth 2: School choice is just a tax break for the rich and will result in economic segregation of students.

Families who are financially well-off already exercise school choice using their own funds. Even a school choice policy that includes them as a matter of fairness would still be of greatest benefit to families who currently have no options and must send their children to underperforming schools.

In most cases, public schools admit students based upon their zip codes. Only families that can afford to buy houses in higher-performing school districts can send their children to them, leading to schools that represent the economic and social compositions of their surrounding neighborhoods.³ School choice will empower all parents to identify, choose, and afford the schools that are best for their children.

For those concerned with the effects on certain racial demographics, a recent study released by researchers from Harvard University and the Brookings Institution shows that a school choice

The Current Education System Creates Two Worlds

In an essay contest that the Center conducted this summer, young adults from Providence made a theme of feeling isolated and segregated.

“I did not know about public or private schools up until my sophomore year of high school. That is when I truly thought to myself that the school system didn't care for me because I was never told of the opportunities I had until it was too late.” — Eduardo Garcia

“I was always taught that when it came to school you either found a way to come up with the money to pay for the good schools (Moses Brown, LaSalle Academy), was smart enough to get into the charter schools and college prep schools or to just settle for the public school closest to your house.” — Tiffany Rezendes

“When I was in high school we all heard about LaSalle and Hendricken but we all knew you needed money or be super smart to go. I use to think about these schools as rich white people schools because we never saw people of color there and the schools were in great condition and in better communities.” — Roy Bolden

program boosted college enrollment among African American participants by 24%. These participants won a school choice scholarship lottery during elementary school and had the opportunity to use it to attend private school, if they desired.⁴

Myth 3: School choice will enable private schools to “cream-skim” the best students from public schools.

School choice empowers parents instead of school district administrators and bureaucrats to choose the best schools for their children’s unique educational needs. Students who are currently succeeding in their educational environments are most likely to stay put. Parents whose children are under-performing and not benefiting from their education will make the most use of alternatives.

Research of charter school programs in seven locations found that, in five of them, students who transferred from regular district public schools actually had lower math scores, prior to transfer, than the averages for their peers.⁵ Moreover, competition encourages public schools to retain their current students and provides incentives to enact meaningful change in the public education system.⁶

Myth 4: Private Schools are not sufficiently regulated or held publicly accountable.

As a first consideration, private schools must adhere to government regulations regarding standard items such as fire safety, sanitation, and other basic health and safety concerns. The larger aspect of government regulation of education, however, is that of accountability.

Public schools may be viewed as “accountable” because they are operated by state and local governments, but they are not accountable to the most influential individuals in children’s education: parents. The existence of school choice programs allows parents to exercise their own power of decision making in how a portion of their educational tax dollars is spent on their children’s education.

In the system of government-run schools currently in place, accountability must be imposed in a centralized fashion. This leads to controversial measures like high-stakes testing, such as using the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) tests as a requirement for high school graduation. By contrast, in the system of alternative schools, accountability comes from the schools’ need to convince parents that they are providing what individual students *need*.

Myth 5: School Choice violates the separation of church and state.

The U.S. Supreme Court has always upheld the right of parents to determine the education that is best for their child.⁷ As the South Carolinians for Responsible Government state:

In the *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* decision, the U. S. Supreme Court determined that a school program must not have the “purpose” or “effect” of advancing or inhibiting religion. Thus, it ruled that the Cleveland, Ohio, [voucher] program is constitutional and that public money can flow to religious schools as a result of a person’s individual choice.

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) states that “both tax credit and voucher programs are school choice options for Rhode Island,” and that “it is likely that the *Zelman* decision, with its distinction between aiding students and aiding the school they choose to attend, will be persuasive” in Rhode Island’s school choice policy discussion.⁸

It is important to note that any discussion of school choice should not be limited to parochial (or other religious) schools, especially those of a certain faith or tradition. For example, Jason Bedrick’s extensive research on school choice policy in Rhode Island advocates on behalf of Jewish Day Schools.⁹ In fact, the first Scholarship Granting Organization (SGO) enacted after Rhode Island’s Corporate Scholarship Tax Credit Program began in 2006 was the Foundation for Rhode Island Day Schools, which is directly affiliated with the Bureau of Jewish Education in Rhode Island (BJERI).

Jewish day schools, or parochial schools of any faith, are far from the extent of schools available. There are many non-religious private options, as well. The table at right details the schools currently participating in Rhode Island’s existing Scholarship Tax Credit Program, including private schools with no religious affiliation.

Myth 6: Parents will use the wrong measures to choose schools for their children and are not equipped to make such decisions.

All parents are capable of making decisions about their children’s education, and they are almost always the most aware of their children’s individual

Rhode Island Scholarship Granting Organizations and Affiliated Private Schools	
	Schools
The Children’s Tuition Fund of Rhode Island	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barrington Christian Academy • West Bay Christian Academy • Masters Regional Academy
The Foundation for Rhode Island Day Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providence Hebrew Day School • Jewish Community Day School
Financial Aid for Children’s Education of Rhode Island (FACE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 46 Catholic elementary and secondary schools
Scholarships to Economically Poor Students (STEPS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Preparatory School • San Miguel School • Sophia Academy • Grace School
Achievement for Children with Challenges Empowered by School Scholarships (ACCESS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Wolf School • School One

Sources: The Rhode Island Scholarship Alliance and the Rhode Island Dept. of Revenue

and unique needs. Parents are the first and primary teachers of their children and should be supported in their pursuit of what’s best for their children.

School choice programs in Rhode Island will be a significant step toward this objective. The resulting competition will provide additional incentives for both government-run and alternative schools to

improve and increase information available to parents as they discern what schools are most prepared and best suited to ensure that all students realize their educational potential.

What Rhode Islanders Think About Education and School Choice

Over the summer, in cooperation with the RI Center for Freedom and Prosperity, the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice conducted a poll concerning Rhode Islanders' attitude toward education and school choice.¹⁰

Right Direction/Wrong Track

According to the results, 52% of Rhode Islanders believe that the state's K-12 education system is on the wrong track, versus 32% who believe it is going in the right direction. Among parents with children in the home or of school age, the gap widens to 60% wrong track versus 28% right direction.

Most noteworthy is the attitude of Rhode Island parents. Of the 20 states in which Friedman has posed this question,¹¹ Rhode Island had the sixth largest negative gap between "right direction" and "wrong track." However, when these results are broken out by parent and non-parent, Rhode Island sees by far the greatest worsening of attitudes among those who actually have school-aged children. See the chart below.

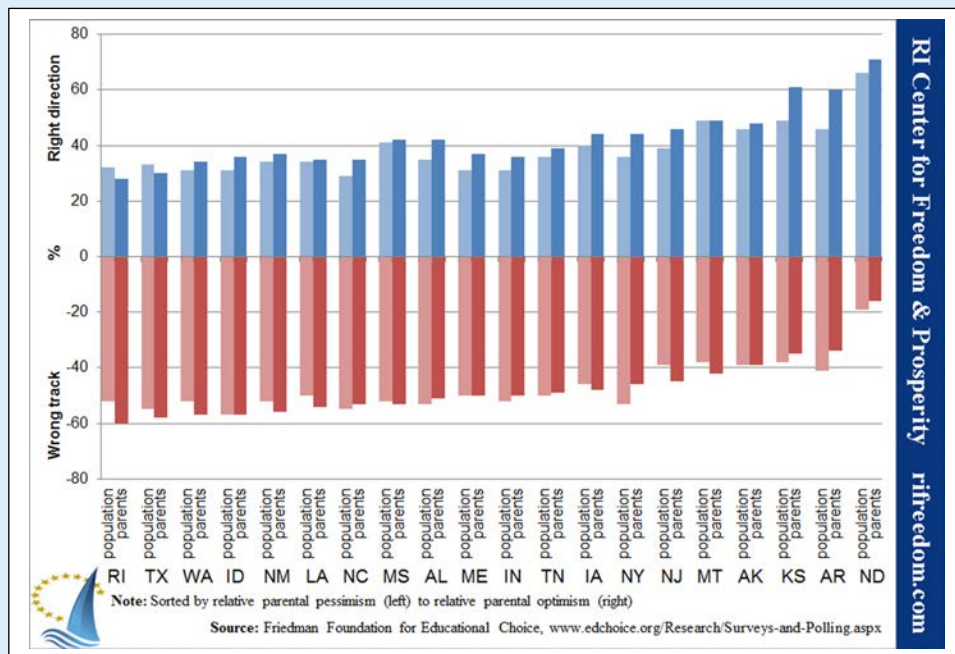
In a majority of states, parents have a better attitude than the population at large. That is, when subtracting the "wrong track" percentage from the "right direction" percentage, parents have a less-negative gap than the population in 13 states. Of the six states in which parents have a more-negative gap, Rhode Island's difference is by far the largest.

Excellent, Good, Fair, and Poor

As bad as Rhode Islanders' expectations are for the future of education in their state, their forward-looking views are actually more optimistic than their opinion about the current condition of the state's public schools.

Is K-12 education going in the "right direction" or on the "wrong track"?

Rhode Island parents are more pessimistic about public schools than both the RI public and parents in other states.



The following table shows that Rhode Islanders are almost twice as likely to express a negative opinion about public schools than a positive one. Of the 21 states in which Friedman has asked this question, Rhode Island is the third most negative, with the highest rating of “fair” and the lowest rating of “excellent,” by a significant degree.

How would you rate Rhode Island’s public school system?

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Population	2.3	32.1	43.7	16.7
Parents	4.1	31.7	44.0	19.0

Source: Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, www.edchoice.org/Research/Surveys-and-Polling.aspx

Once again, parents of school-aged children have a more negative attitude than the general public. Although parents are slightly more likely to rate the schools as “excellent,” the percentage giving that answer is still lower than the general populations of any other state Friedman has surveyed.¹²

Negative attitudes of “fair” or “poor” are, not surprisingly, more prevalent in urban areas than elsewhere, at 71% in RI. Correspondingly, the racial grouping with the most negative opinion about public schools was the black community, which at 80% fair-or-poor was twenty percentage points more likely to express negative views than both Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites.¹³

The only other group with a comparable attitude was Republicans, at 79% fair-or-poor.

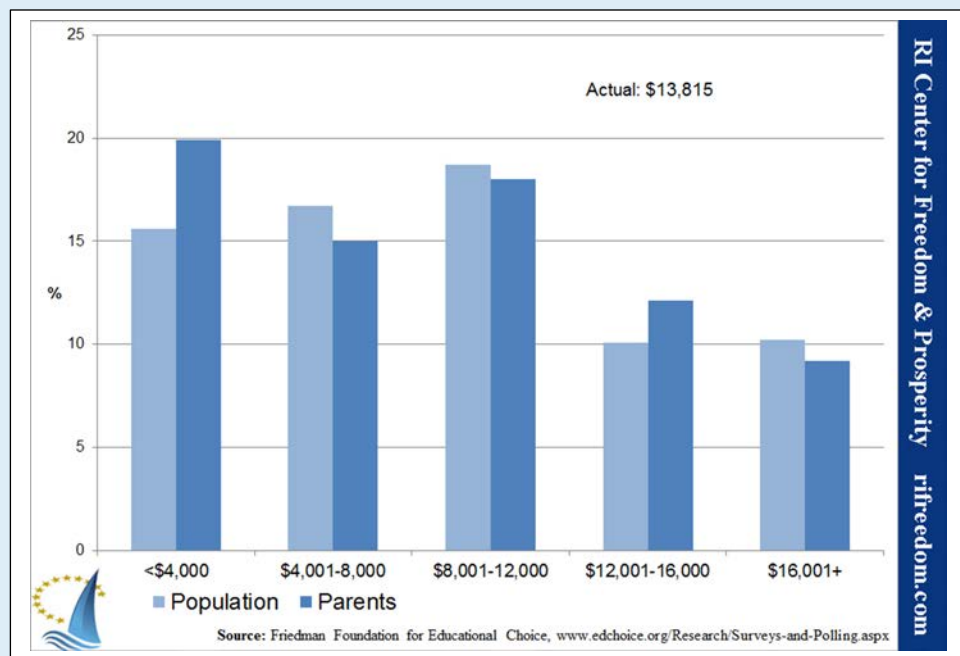
Per-Student Spending

More than half of Rhode Islanders underestimate the per-student expenditures of the state’s government-run schools, with just 10% choosing the correct range. (Only 10% overestimated.) At the time of the survey, the latest available number for average per-student spending was \$13,815.

As the chart below illustrates, although parents were more likely than the overall public to choose the correct range, they were even more likely to choose the lowest. Part of the difference results from the fact that parents were more likely to estimate at all.

How much do you think is spent per year on each student in Rhode Island’s public schools?

By an overwhelming margin, Rhode Islanders tend to underestimate the cost of public education.



Friedman then split the survey respondents into two groups. Half were asked whether they thought per-student spending was too low, about right, or too high; half were informed about the actual number and then asked the same question.

Going by their own estimates, 46% of respondents thought spending was “too low,” 24% “about right,” and 18% “too high.” When provided with the real dollar amount, this shifted to 26% “too low,” 39% “about right,” and 24% “too high.”¹⁴ In other words, a plurality of Rhode Islanders think around \$14,000 per student is the appropriate amount to spend on public schools, with almost equal numbers saying that’s “too low” or “too high.” (See chart below.)

It’s possible, however, that hearing the actual number only in the context of their own estimates affected respondents’ judgment. They were not asked to pick a dollar amount that public schools should spend per pupil, and they were not provided with other relevant information, such as the (generally lower) tuition of private schools.

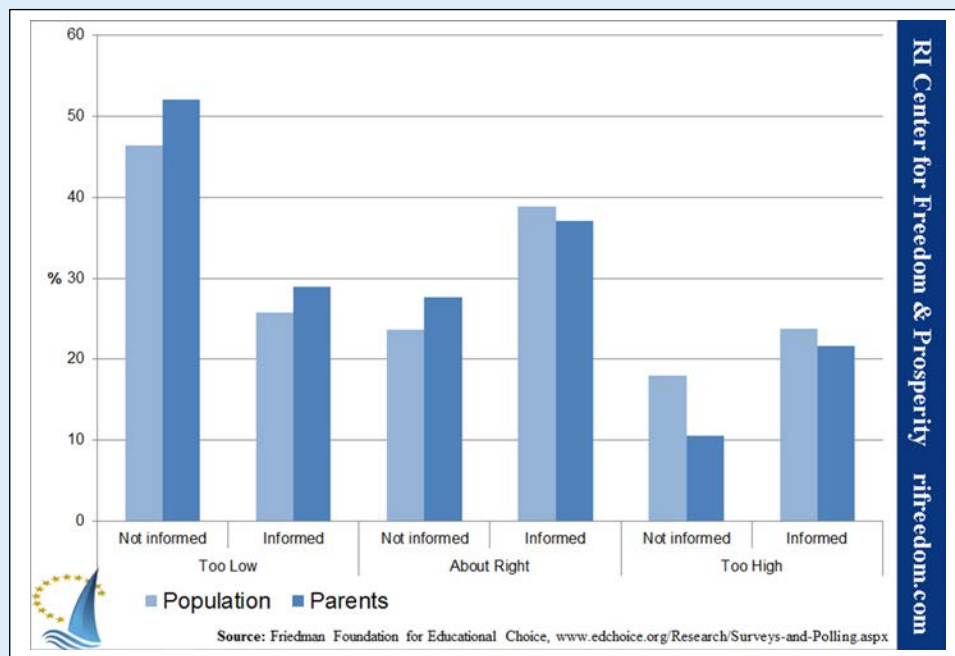
More broadly, the survey permits only speculation about whether being better informed about per-

student spending would improve people’s opinion of schools or make their dissatisfaction even stronger. There are, however, some indications that negative attitudes correspond with belief that costs are high, rather than belief that schools are underfunded:

- Of those who estimated per-student spending above \$16,000, 66% had said that the school system is on the “wrong track.”
- The least-pessimistic group was that which initially estimated per-student spending at \$4,001–8,000.
- Parents (who, again, have a more negative view of the school system than the general public in Rhode Island) made larger shifts than the general public toward “too high” when informed about per student spending. Parents who were not informed were seven percentage points *less* likely than the general public to say “too high” and six percentage points *more* likely to say “too low.” Among those who were informed, the “too high” gap dropped to two percentage points, and the “too low” gap dropped to three percentage points. The chart below illustrates the shifts in opinion when respondents were better informed.

Do you believe that public school funding in Rhode Island is at a level that is too high, too low, or about right?

When informed about per-student costs, fewer Rhode Islanders think it’s too low.



Choosing and Grading Schools

If it were up to them, a majority of Rhode Islanders, 53.5%, would choose to send their children to private schools, whether parents or non-parents.

Differences emerge between parents and non-parents when it comes to the other options. The next answer for both was “regular public school,” but non-parents chose it 30.1% of the time, compared with parents’ 27.0%, who made up the difference with stronger support for every other option, including charter schools, homeschooling, and virtual schools.

Not surprisingly, Rhode Islanders were more likely to give alternative schools in their areas higher grades than regular public (district) schools:

In thinking about the schools in your area [in Rhode Island], what grade would you give:

	Regular Public	Charter	Private or Parochial
A			
Population	9.2	13.1	31.4
Parents	5.6	7.7	33.1
B			
Population	33.5	30.5	35.4
Parents	41.1	37.7	30.7
C			
Population	37.4	13.6	12.8
Parents	34.3	14.7	13.8
D			
Population	9.4	3.5	2.7
Parents	10.0	6.1	1.3
F			
Population	6.3	2.2	0.6
Parents	7.1	3.7	1.1

Source: Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, www.edchoice.org/Research/Surveys-and-Polling.aspx

One might expect sour attitudes about public schools to translate into positive attitudes toward alternatives, and the numbers suggest that tendency is real. However, looking at various demographic comparisons, it is interesting to note that a person’s circumstances have an effect.¹⁵

Divided by area type (urban, suburban, small town, and rural), urbanites are the least likely to give public schools an A or B and the most likely to give grades of C and below. When it comes to charter schools, urbanites lead in giving Bs and are generally in the middle of the categories for the other grades. As might be expected, therefore, they edge toward the front in giving high grades to private schools.

However, divided by racial category (Hispanic, black, and non-Hispanic white), respondents show contrasting attitudes. Blacks are far more likely to grade public schools with Ds or Fs and less likely to give them As or Bs. They lead in giving charters Bs, but also in giving them Ds. What’s interesting is that they are also less likely than other races to give private schools As or Bs, mainly settling on Cs.

Not surprisingly, blacks were most likely, among the groups, to say “don’t know,” rather than to grade private schools, while they were three or four times *less* likely to say “don’t know” for charter schools. These results may be a reflection of familiarity and the attitude described in the sidebar on page 2 above — in terms of both general pessimism and a sense of segregated systems.

School Choice Reforms

In keeping with the change in opinions when respondents were told how much Rhode Island spends per public school student, opinions about

school choice reforms become substantially more positive when respondents are informed about them.

When simply asked about their view of charter schools, 52.4% of respondents said that they “favor” them, with almost an even split between “somewhat favor” and “strongly favor.” That left 14.2% actively opposing them and 31.0% who had either “never heard of charter schools” or “didn’t know” for some other reason. (Another 2.4% declined to answer the question at all.)

After the interviewer explained that “charter schools are public schools that have more control over their own budget, staff, and curriculum, and are exempt from many existing public school regulations,” favorability increased by almost ten percentage points, to 62.0%. With the “don’t know” response shrinking to 15.7%, opposition to charters also grew, however, to 21.6%.

The results were even more dramatic for “vouchers” (which are the same as the scholarships proposed in school choice legislation submitted in Rhode Island last session). Initially, 39.7% favored vouchers, with “strongly favor” taking a few more percentage points

than “somewhat favor.” Opposition came in at 23.3%, with another large segment, 36.6%, choosing the “never heard of/don’t know” option.

The interviewer then explained that such a system:

... allows parents the option of sending their child to the school of their choice, whether that school is public or private, including both religious and non-religious schools.

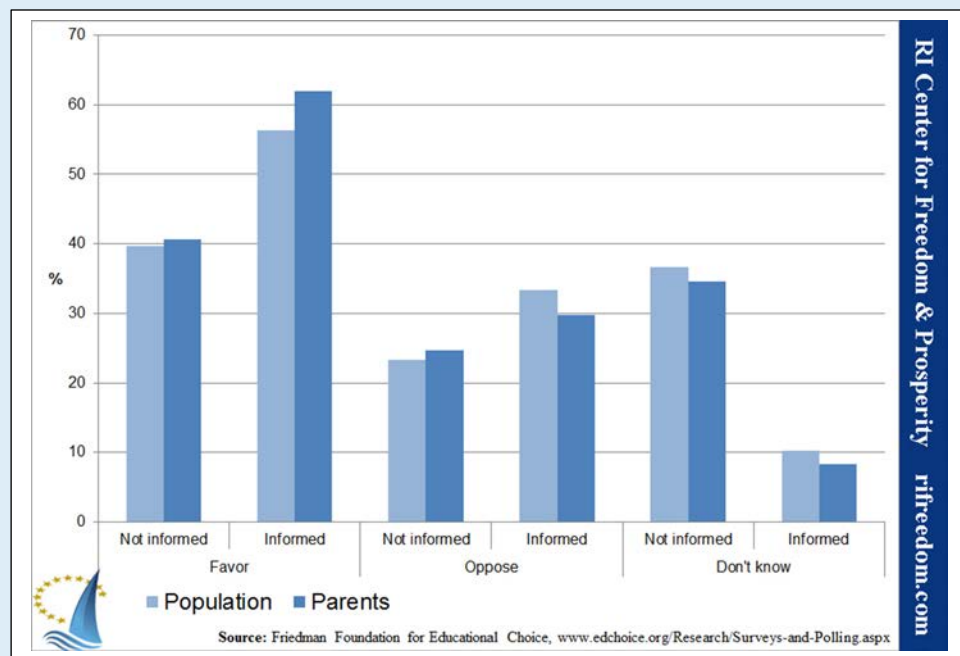
If this policy were adopted, tax dollars currently allocated to a school district would be allocated to parents in the form of a “school voucher” to pay partial or full tuition for their child’s school.

In this case, favorability jumped to 56.3%, with “strongly” responses leading “somewhat” by six and a half percentage points. With “don’t know” falling to 10.3%, opposition was also able to increase, to 33.3%.

As shown in the chart below, the switch to favorable opinions was even more pronounced among parents, who shifted to less opposition than the overall population when informed.

In general, do you favor or oppose a school voucher system?

When informed about a full school choice reform, Rhode Islanders viewed it more favorably.



Some of the highest percentages recorded throughout the survey came from black Rhode Islanders on the subject of voucher favorability. Their support for school vouchers was already higher than the general population's, at 57.2% "favor." When informed about the reform, that number grew to 75.7% — with 68.9% saying "strongly favor" and only 6.8% saying "somewhat favor."¹⁶

For their part, Hispanics leapt from 26.5% "favor" to 71.5%. However, they were more evenly split between "strong" and "somewhat."

Fairness of Opportunity

One finding of the survey that might surprise those who've followed the political strategies around implementing free-market reforms is that there's a very strong sentiment for fairness — defined not in terms of redistribution, but in terms of equal treatment for all.

Asked if "school vouchers should be available to all families, regardless of incomes and special needs," respondents agreed 61.8% versus 32.8% that they should be. Perhaps surprisingly, this sentiment was strongest among those in the lowest income group analyzed (annual household income less than \$40,000), at 63.7% versus 32.0%.

Conclusion

Rhode Islanders are down on and pessimistic about the system of schools operated by state and local government. Parents — those most familiar with the school system — are even more so.

Consequently, many families feel trapped within a system that they lack the resources to avoid through alternatives. In the high-tax state of Rhode Island, such families would have to pay for education twice, not only through their taxes, but also through tuition payments. They are therefore very open to policy options that would increase their opportunities for school choice, especially when they are educated about those policies.

At the same time, many of the general impressions about school choice policies that might frighten off parents or civically minded residents turn out not to be true. By granting families the freedom to assess schools and choose those that most fully serve the unique needs of their own children, and by injecting competitive incentives into a system that is largely a monopoly of government-branded schools, teachers and administrators have reason to adapt and strive to attract students.

While, as with every policy, the beneficial effects of school choice will bring the most advantage to the most challenged students, Rhode Islanders feel strongly that the education system — the total system, public and private, by which we educate our children — should offer new opportunities across the board.

¹ Results in Texas were analyzed by Shawna Grosskopf, Kathy J. Hayes, and Lori L. Taylor. “The Relative Efficiency of Charter Schools,” *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics*. Vol. 80, Issue 1, p. 67-97. March 2009. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8292.2008.00381.x/abstract>. An NPR StateImpact study in Ohio came to the same conclusion, by Molly Bloom, “As a Group, Ohio Urban Charter Schools Deliver Similar Performance for Less Money.” October 19, 2011. <https://stateimpact.npr.org/ohio/2011/10/19/as-a-group-ohio-charter-schools-deliver-similar-performance-for-less-money/>

² Susan Aud, “Education by the Numbers: The Fiscal Effect of School Choice Programs, 1990-2006,” Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, April 2007: http://www.edchoice.org/CMSModules/EdChoice/FileLibrary/243/voucher_savings_final.pdf

³ South Carolinians for Responsible Government, “Myths”: <http://www.scr.gov.org/why/myths/>

⁴ Matthew M. Chingos and Paul E. Peterson, “The Impact of School Vouchers on College Enrollment,” *Education Next*, Summer 2013 Issue, Vol. 13, No. 3: <http://educationnext.org/the-impact-of-school-vouchers-on-college-enrollment/>

⁵ Ron Zimmer et alia. “Do Charter Schools ‘Cream Skim’ Students and Increase Racial-Ethnic Segregation?” Michigan State University. October 2009:

http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/papers/Zimmer_COMPLETE.pdf; abbreviated summary: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/conference/presentations/Zimmer-Gill-Booker-Lavertu-Witte.pdf>

⁶ The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, Frequently Asked Questions on School Choice, “How Does School Choice affect Public Schools?” <http://www.edchoice.org/getattachment/School-Choice/School-Choice-FAQs/How-does-school-choice-affect-public-schools.pdf>

⁷ South Carolinians for Responsible Government, Myths, <http://www.scr.gov.org/why/myths/>

⁸ The Institute for Justice and the American Legislative Exchange Council, “School Choice and State Constitutions, A Guide to Designing School Choice Programs,” April 2007 <http://www.alec.org/docs/IJ-ALEC-school-choice.pdf>

⁹ Jason Bedrick, “Rhode Island Jewish Day Schools and Scholarship Tax Credits,” The Pioneer Institute, March 2012 <http://pioneerinstitute.org/?wpdmdl=4&>

¹⁰ For complete results, see the files available at <http://www.edchoice.org/Research/Reports/Rhode-Island-K-12-and-School-Choice-Survey.aspx>

¹¹ Friedman has posed this question in Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington.

¹² This question adds Virginia to the states listed in end note 10.

¹³ It’s important to note, while reviewing these demographic subcategories, that the number of respondents in them can be very small, given the populations’ presence in Rhode Island. Readers should therefore be cautious about taking these points as definitive. We highlight them, here, because they indicate a specific attitude in a community that is more likely to be disadvantage and therefore merits further research.

¹⁴ There were slight differences between the two groups with respect to their original estimates. All variations were within one percentage point except that the group that was given the actual number had been two percentage points more likely to say a number in the \$4,001–8,000 range and three percentage points less likely to say a number in the \$8,001–12,000 range.

¹⁵ See note 13.

¹⁶ See note 13.