

Lifeline and Education Choice Myths and Facts

SUMMARY

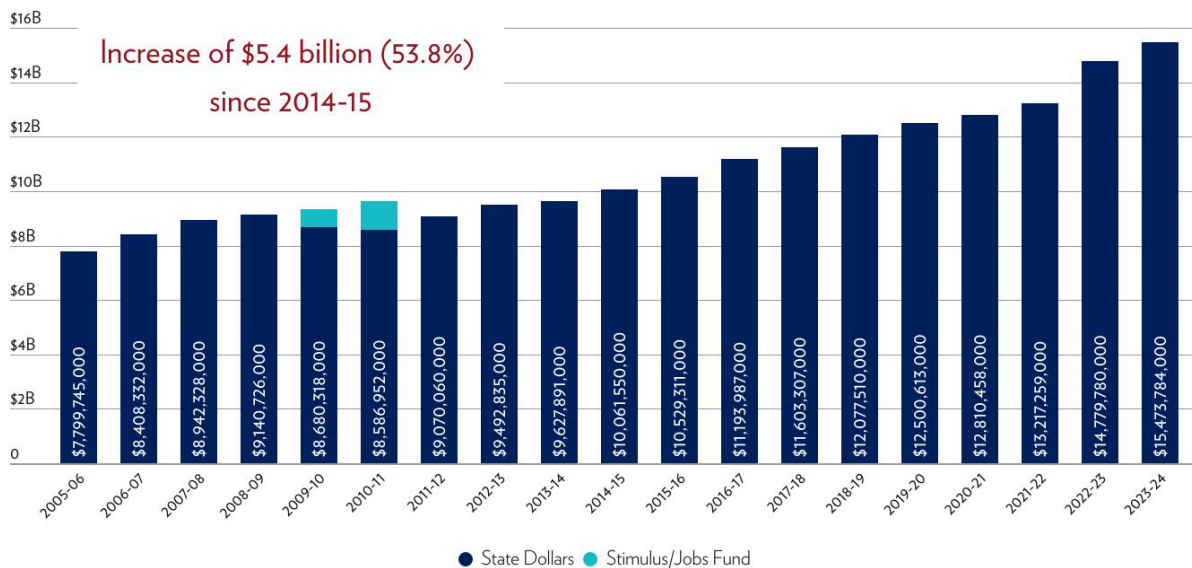
- Lifeline Scholarships, also known as the Pennsylvania Award for Student Success (PASS) program, would offer scholarships ranging from \$2,500 to \$15,000 per year for students in the commonwealth’s lowest-performing public schools. Lifeline Scholarships/PASS would enable students to attend a school of their choice.
- Gov. Josh Shapiro continues to endorse the proposed scholarship, even after line-item vetoing the program in the 2023 state budget, calling it **unfinished business**.
- Unfortunately, conversations about education choice are fraught with myths about education spending, the success of education choice programs, and the need for programs like Lifeline Scholarships/PASS. This fact sheet addresses the most common myths.

MYTH: Funding for public schools has been slashed.

FACT: State support of public schools has increased by \$5.4 billion in the last decade to an all-time high of \$15.5 billion in 2023-24.

- This increase, part of the state budget, **represents 54 percent over the last decade**.

State Support of Public Schools



Source: PA Department of Education, Summary of State Appropriations for Education

- Total public school revenues from all sources (state, local, and federal) reached \$35.8 billion as of 2021–22, an increase of 38 percent since 2013. This total precedes both the last two state budget increases and the distribution of billions in federal COVID-19 relief.
- Pennsylvania school districts are stockpiling taxpayer resources, with over **\$5.96 billion** in general reserve funds and another \$2.1 billion (includes charter schools and other public schools) in unspent federal pandemic aid still sitting in the Treasury.
- **Pennsylvania public schools** receive nearly \$22,000 per student from state, federal, and local sources. Meanwhile, public schools employ more staff and more teachers today than in 2000, despite fewer students.
- Former Gov. Tom Wolf himself traveled **around** the state **celebrating** his legacy of public school funding increases. In 2022, **Speaker Joanna McClinton**, as then-House Democratic leader, joined the former governor in celebrating unprecedented spending increases. With the passage of the 2023–24 budget, Shapiro has also celebrated “**record increases**” in education funding.

MYTH: The Commonwealth Court ordered \$4.6 billion in additional funding for public schools.

FACT: The court’s February 2023 ruling did not order any specific measures or solutions to make education funding more equitable but instead said lawmakers should work to ensure “every student receives a meaningful opportunity to succeed.”¹

- The “\$4.6 billion in new funding” was from a “shortfall” estimate commissioned by special interest lobbyists and submitted by the plaintiffs citing a 2007 Pennsylvania Board of Education costing-out study. Judge Renée Cohn Jubelirer explicitly questioned the study’s “current relevance,” stating she was “not convinced” by the 18-year-old numbers in this study.²
- In fact, since the 2013–14 launch of the funding lawsuit, state support of public schools increased by \$5.9 billion, and total school district revenue (through 2021–22) increased by \$9.6 billion.

PA School District Funding Key Numbers

Point	Year	“State Support of Public Schools” (State Budget)	Total School District Revenue*	School District reserves**
Current school district funding levels	(See Notes)	\$15,581,745,000	\$38,145,026,460	\$5,964,606,149
Increase From	Year			
Since Costing Out Study	2006-07	\$7,173,413,000	\$16,006,029,488	\$4,094,443,579
Since launch of Ed Funding Lawsuit	2013-14	\$5,953,854,000	\$11,927,301,034	\$1,980,718,893
Since Gov. Wolf took office	2014-15	\$5,520,195,000	\$10,566,740,208	\$1,874,735,767
Since Updated Study that Court found “not persuasive”	2018-19	\$3,504,235,000	\$6,729,792,888	\$1,354,765,097

SOURCES: Pennsylvania Department of Education, Annual Financial Reports; Pennsylvania Department of Education, Summary of State Appropriations for Education.

Notes:

*Actual 2021-22 Annual Financial Report data plus state budget increases for 2022 and 2023.

**As of 2021-22

- The Lifeline Scholarship/PASS Program would help fulfill the court’s mandate to help *every student* get a meaningful opportunity to succeed—without taking any funding from public schools.

Pennsylvania's most vulnerable students *do not have* a meaningful opportunity to succeed if the only option available is a perpetually underperforming school determined by their zip code.

MYTH: Pennsylvania is a leader in public education.

FACT: Pennsylvania is a leader in education spending but trails in educational outcomes.

- In 2022, fewer than half of Pennsylvania's graduating high school seniors took the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), [ranking 27th nationwide](#) with an average score of 1091.³
- Pennsylvania [ranks seventh in the nation](#) in per-student spending but student performance remains below pre-pandemic levels.
- The most recent [Pennsylvania System of School Assessment \(PSSA\)](#) scores show that more than half of the state's fourth graders and nearly 75 percent of its eighth graders cannot perform math at grade level,⁴ clear evidence that Pennsylvania students [have not recovered](#) from COVID school closures.
- Nearly 250,000 kids in the commonwealth remain trapped in chronically failing "[low-achieving](#)" public schools, which the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) defines as schools in the bottom 15 percent based on PSSA test scores.⁵ Among the [lowest-performing](#) high schools in the state, 33 have zero students doing math at grade level, and six do not have a single student reading at grade level. Our kids deserve better.
- Ten states are leading the charge toward school choice through providing universal Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) for all students in those states. An additional 32 states offer some type of school choice program.
- ESAs are restricted-use spending accounts funded with state tax dollars. The funds must be for "qualified education expenses," which include tuition, school-related fees, and special education services fees associated with attendance at a non-public school.
- The Lifeline Scholarship/PASS Program would allow funding to follow the student through ESAs, referred to as Education Opportunity Accounts (EOAs).
- Pennsylvania can become a leader in education by passing Lifeline Scholarships/PASS and joining the ranks of other states that allow funds to follow the students to their school of choice.

MYTH: School vouchers lead to segregation.

FACT: School choice by mortgage is the most common form of choice in Pennsylvania.

- Wealthy families can afford homes in top school districts and often choose where to live based on the local public school. Low-income parents lack this option and often find their children redlined out of these communities. Thus, low-income children are frequently stuck in low-performing public schools simply because of where they live and their families' economic means.
- School district attendance boundaries are often set with race, ethnicity, and income in mind, keeping disadvantaged students trapped in schools assigned by address.

- Seven of eight [studies on the topic](#) found that school choice programs across the country led to increased racial and ethnic diversity in the classroom and reduced segregation.⁶
- Lifeline Scholarships/PASS would allow families to choose a school that fits the unique needs of their children, rather than forcing them to attend a school based on where they live.

MYTH: Lifeline Scholarships/PASS take money away from public education.

FACT: Funding for the Lifeline Scholarship/PASS Program does not impact school district funds.⁷

- There are more than [1.7 million](#) children attending Pennsylvania’s K–12 public schools.
- [Fewer than 15 percent](#) (250,000) are eligible for Lifeline Scholarships/PASS, which, as currently proposed, has a cap of \$100 million.
- Only about 13,000 students would be able to receive scholarships with this cap limit.
- The Lifeline Scholarship/PASS language passed by the Senate creates a new state fund, separate from public education subsidies. This legislation would have no impact on funding for public schools.
- The Lifeline Scholarship/PASS legislation’s capped funds of \$100 million target students in the lowest-achieving schools, allowing families to choose the school that best meets their child’s needs.
- School districts would not lose a penny of funding even when students leave the school district on a Lifeline Scholarship because the district will continue to retain funding, even for students who are no longer attending due to taking advantage of the Lifeline Scholarship/PASS Program.
- The students who choose to remain in district schools would benefit from annual per-pupil funding increases, smaller class sizes, and improved access to resources. Shapiro, in a [post-veto August interview](#) with WGAL8, qualified Lifeline Scholarships/PASS as an “additive” program that “doesn’t take anything away from public schools.”
- Pennsylvania’s [Educational Improvement Tax Credit \(EITC\) and Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit \(OSTC\)](#) programs provide scholarships for approximately 77,000 students.⁸ Many of these tax credit scholarships are distributed [via lottery](#), with the [demand](#) exceeding the supply.
- Lifeline Scholarships/PASS would help to eliminate the backlog for EITC and OSTC scholarships.

MYTH: School choice programs will leave 99 percent of children behind.

FACT: Investing in Lifeline Scholarships/PASS and offering choice creates competition to improve all schools. Concern for kids left behind is an admission that kids trapped in low-performing and poorly maintained schools need rescuing.

- The same logic applies in Pennsylvania because Lifeline Scholarships/PASS would provide much-needed opportunity to low-income families now and increase per-pupil funding for schools struggling with facility needs.
- Studies show that competition from school choice alternatives helps kids who attend public schools. [EdChoice](#) found that 26 out of 29 empirical studies concluded that school choice programs improve the academic outcomes of public school students. A recent study by the [University of Arkansas](#)

found that, by exerting competitive pressure on public schools, school choice programs improve academic outcomes [across the board](#).

MYTH: Lifeline Scholarships of \$5,000 and \$10,000 won't help poor kids afford private school.

FACT: The average private school tuition in Pennsylvania is less than \$12,200.

- During an ABC 27 interview, [House Majority Leader Matt Bradford said](#), “those vouchers aren’t for sufficient amounts for those poor kids to get in them.”
- The average tuition among [all private schools in Pennsylvania is \\$12,170](#).⁹ However, many of the private schools that serve low-income students have tuition well below that—and provide financial aid, using charitable dollars, to help alleviate the cost for students. Some worthy examples include [Mother Teresa Academy](#) in Erie, the [Neighborhood Academy](#) in Pittsburgh, the [Independence Mission Schools](#) in Philadelphia, [Kings Academy](#) in Reading, [Bishop McCourt](#) in Johnstown, and many others.
- The proposed Lifeline Scholarship/PASS amounts would rank in the middle of the pack [relative to programs in other states](#)—all of which serve low-income students and have seen supply and demand increase.
- Further in 2021–22, Pennsylvania’s tax credit scholarship programs provided, on average, \$2,583 for EITC and \$1,853 for OSTC per student. These scholarships serve tens of thousands of low- and middle-income families in all 67 counties, with continued demand (including 63,000 scholarship applications turned away in 2022).¹⁰
- According to Simple Tuition Solutions, the [average household income](#) for the EITC scholarship recipients is \$64,000, and it is \$52,000 for OSTC families. The Independent Fiscal Office—in [a 2022 report that Bradford voted to approve](#)—said that for OSTC “70 percent of scholarships and 77 percent of funding went to students categorized as priority,” namely, students from households with incomes below 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.¹¹
- There are 715 [private schools](#) in Pennsylvania serving low-income students.¹² For 269 of these schools, 50 to 100 percent of their students are low-income.
- The Lifeline Scholarship/PASS Program would let low-income students currently enrolled in a bottom 15 percent public school choose a different school than the one assigned to them based on their zip code.

MYTH: School choice programs lack accountability.

FACT: Giving families options means they can leave a school if it is not working for their kids, choice is the ultimate form of accountability.

- Public schools have required standardized tests, such as PSSA and Keystone exams, yet this hasn’t led to accountability. There is no recourse for students trapped in schools with failing standardized test scores. Schools that are repeatedly underperforming, including those that report zero students proficient in math or reading continue to receive more funding, even as performance declines.

- Among the lowest-performing high schools in the state, [33 have zero students doing math at grade level](#), and six do not have a single student reading at grade level.
- Private schools are held [accountable](#) to families, the public, and government authorities, with many undertaking financial audits and standardized tests to evaluate student performance.
- The [most recent](#) findings from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES) indicate that 80 percent of private school parents are very satisfied with their child’s school, compared with 62 percent of public school parents.¹³ The Cato Institute’s release “[Choosing to Learn](#)” states: “True accountability comes not from top-down regulations but from parents financially empowered to exit schools that fail to meet their child’s needs.”
- [NAEP data](#) show that [Catholic school students excelled](#) during the pandemic, while public schools lost more ground.¹⁴
- No student should remain trapped in a failing school because of their zip code. Lifeline Scholarships/PASS would allow families to customize education to fit the unique needs of their children.

MYTH: Private schools cherry-pick their students.

FACT: Lifeline Scholarships/PASS would enable private schools to increase services and hire additional staff to serve special needs students.

- Public school districts often funnel students with extensive learning challenges to specific schools within a district, regardless of whether the school is the best fit for the child.
- While private schools are not required to,¹⁵ [many](#) do serve students who require an [individualized education program](#).
- When a public school cannot accommodate students with special needs, the district must pay for the child to attend a private school through the [placement options for special education](#) process. This is labor-intensive, with the child’s special needs going unmet while the district works to place the child.
- Lifeline Scholarships/PASS would allow families to choose the best school for their child without delay and without permission from the public school.

MYTH: Pennsylvania voters do not want school choice.

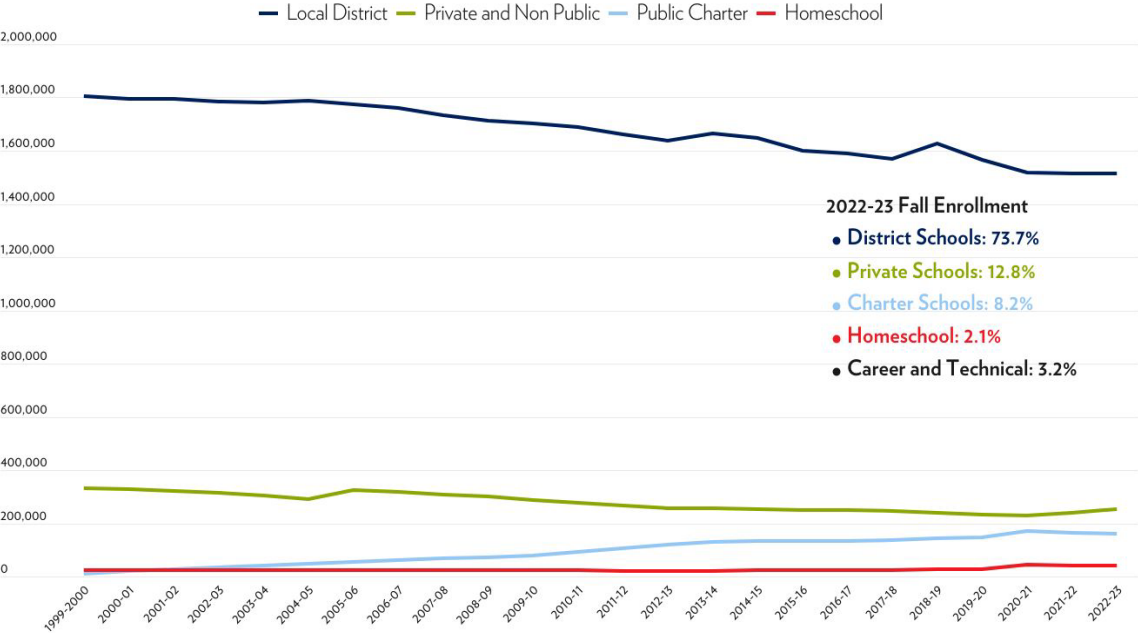
FACT: Polling shows broad support for expanding school choice including Lifeline Scholarships/PASS.

Pennsylvania already has more than 500,000 students—almost 30 percent—who receive their education outside of the district-assigned school setting: 252,000 attend private/non-public schools, 162,000 attend charter schools, more than 66,000 attend a career/technical school, while 42,000 are homeschooled. Thousands more attend magnet schools.

- Pennsylvania families want and need more options beyond the traditional public school setting. According to a [recent poll](#), fewer than one in five respondents would choose a public district school, and more than half would choose a private school if cost were no concern.¹⁶

- Shapiro believes non-public schools provide quality education. He recently renewed his support for Lifeline Scholarships/PASS on WFMZ-TV’s *Business Matters*, saying: “I do believe that we should have scholarships for poor kids in struggling school districts—particularly poor kids of color—to give them an opportunity to give them to get more tutoring, to get more help, to be put in the position where they can go to the schools that are best for them.”

Pennsylvania PreK-12 School Enrollment Trends



¹ [William Penn School District et al. v. Pa. Department of Education et al.](#), No. 587 M.D. 2014, (Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court, Feb. 7, 2023), 773–78.

² [William Penn School District et al. v. Pa. Department of Education et al.](#), 679.

³ National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Table 226.40 “SAT Mean Scores of High School Seniors, Standard Deviations, and Percentage of the Graduating Class Taking the SAT, by State: Selected Years, 2017 through 2022,” accessed December 12, 2023, U.S. Department of Education, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_226.40.asp.

⁴ Commonwealth Foundation, “2023 PSSA Scores Highlight the Need for Educational Opportunity,” November 27, 2023, <https://www.commonwealthfoundation.org/research/2023-pssa-scores/>.

⁵ Pennsylvania Department of Education, “Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit Program,” accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/Opportunity%20Scholarship%20Tax%20Credit%20Program/Pages/default.aspx>.

⁶ EdChoice, “The 123s of School Choice: What the Research Says about Private School Choice Programs in America,” 2023 Edition, (Indianapolis, IN: EdChoice.org, October 5, 2023), 55–58, <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/123s-of-School-Choice-WEB-07-10-23.pdf>.

⁷ Commonwealth Foundation, “Lifeline (PASS) Scholarship Program,” August 1, 2023, <https://www.commonwealthfoundation.org/research/lifeline-pass-scholarship-program/>.

⁸ Commonwealth Foundation, “Tax Credit Scholarships: An Investment in Educational Opportunity,” December 19, 2023, <https://www.commonwealthfoundation.org/research/tax-credit-scholarships-pa/>.

⁹ Private School Review, “Pennsylvania Private Schools by Tuition Cost,” accessed January 2, 2024, <https://www.privateschoolreview.com/tuition-stats/pennsylvania>.

¹⁰ Commonwealth Foundation, “Tax Credit Scholarships: An Investment in Educational Opportunity.”

¹¹ Matthew J. Knittel, “Pennsylvania Educational Tax Credits: An Evaluation of Program Performance,” (Harrisburg, PA: Independent Fiscal Office, January 2022), 15–16, http://www.ifo.state.pa.us/download.cfm?file=Resources/Documents/TC_2022_Educational_Tax_Credits.pdf.

¹² Pennsylvania Department of Education, “Private and Non-Public Schools Enrollment Reports,” accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/Enrollment/Pages/PrivateNPEnrRpts.aspx>.

¹³ Rachel Hanson, Chris Pugliese, and Sarah Grady, “Parent and Family Involvement in Education: 2019 National Household Education Surveys Program, First Look,” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, July 2020), 15, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020076full.pdf>.

¹⁴ National Catholic Education Association, “The Nation’s Report Card Shows Catholic Schools Excelling Post-Pandemic,” news release, October 2022, https://ncea.org/NCEA/NCEA/How_We_Serve/News/Press_Releases/The_Nation_s_Report_Card_Shows_Catholic_Schools_Excelling_Post-Pandemic.aspx.

¹⁵ Pennsylvania Department of Education, “IEPs and 504 Service Agreements,” accessed December 12, 2023, [https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/Homebound%20Instruction/Pages/IEPs-and-504-Service-Agreements.aspx#:~:text=option%20to%20pursue,-,Individualized%20Education%20Program%20\(IEP\),who%20are%20disabled%20or%20gifted](https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/Homebound%20Instruction/Pages/IEPs-and-504-Service-Agreements.aspx#:~:text=option%20to%20pursue,-,Individualized%20Education%20Program%20(IEP),who%20are%20disabled%20or%20gifted).

¹⁶ Commonwealth Foundation, “Common Ground in the Commonwealth Q4 Survey,” December 2023, <https://www.commonwealthfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Common-Ground-in-the-Commonwealth-Q4-Survey-Analysis-FINAL-1.pdf>.