

Freedom to



Fighting for the freedom to choose the education that best fits their children's needs is a relentless pursuit for families facing the constraints of a one-size-fits-all system.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LYNDON FRENCH



The Tenacious Fight for Educational Choice

By Bekah Congdon and Audrey Grayson

Learn

Akia McNeary is an advocate for education choice not only for her children but for all families and students in Kentucky.

The sun isn't up in Florence, Kentucky, when Akia McNeary's day begins. A single mother of four and the owner of a house-cleaning business, McNeary relies on careful planning, tight budgeting, and strict routines to keep her family and business afloat.

A significant portion of her day revolves around the diverse educational needs of her three school-aged children and the different schools they attend based on their learning styles, interests, and personalities.

"It's not easy. There's different school calendars, schedules, and bus routes. I sacrifice a lot for my kids' education," McNeary says.

McNeary's oldest son, Raymone, now 22, was her first experience fighting for the educational needs of her kids. "I made the decision to pull him out of the public middle school when he was being bullied and administrators did not handle it well," McNeary says.

McNeary turned to private schools near her, where she hoped her son would reap the benefits of smaller class sizes, individualized attention, and a stricter learning environment. She couldn't afford the tuition, so she asked one of the school directors if she could perform custodial work to make up for the gaps in her payments. They allowed him to enroll, and McNeary says he thrived.

"I graduated high school at a fourth-grade reading level. I'm fighting for my kids to have the opportunities I didn't have," she adds.

Kentucky is one of 18 states that still has very limited or no school choice options.

Attempts to change that have had mixed results.

In 2021, the Kentucky Supreme Court struck down the Education Opportunity Account program, which was designed to enable families to tailor education to their children's needs; this effectively barred the Kentucky General Assembly from passing school choice legislation. Efforts to amend the state constitution and expand educational choice programs are ongoing. For now, most Kentucky families have the same two options as McNeary: send your kids to the public school you are assigned to or find a way to pay private school tuition.

"Anti-school choice myths disproportionately prevent the least advantaged from having educational options. The most advantaged families already have school choice," says Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute. "They can afford to live in neighborhoods with the best public schools. They can afford to pay out of pocket for the costs of private education. Funding students directly allows more families to access educational alternatives. School choice is an equalizer."

McNeary's 17-year-old, Isaiah, and 8-year-old, Monae, have thrived in public schools, but her 14-year-old, Nehemiah, has struggled, oscillating between private and public schools due to changes to Kentucky's voucher program rules. After Nehemiah was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, McNeary felt it was critical to stretch her finances to keep him in a private school with smaller class sizes and



“That’s what think tank work is often about: laying the groundwork for the day when political stars align.”

more individualized attention—voucher or not.

“There isn’t one school or learning environment that fits every child. My four children are completely different,” McNeary says. “As a mom, I check in with my kids and listen to what they need. I don’t think legislators should decide how I educate them. They weren’t there when I gave birth to them, when I named them. They don’t know my children. How could they decide what education is best for them?”

Unfortunately for McNeary and other parents in Kentucky, the choices they can make for their kids’ education remain very limited.

The Long Road to Educational Freedom

Cato has long been a leading source for research on educational choice. As far back as 1981, Cato published studies on the problems with the monopoly school system and the opportunities for competition.

Cato’s work has powered school choice to grow by leaps and bounds. As of 1989, there were no private school choice programs or charter schools in the United States. In 2023, there were more than 1.3 million students utilizing alternative education, including private schools and homeschooling, through tax credit scholarship, voucher, or education savings account (ESA) programs

and roughly 3.7 million children in publicly funded, privately run charter schools.

In 1996, Baltimore mayor Kurt Schmoke urged his city’s school board to experiment with parental choice. The *Baltimore Sun* reported that Schmoke said he repeatedly came back to the work of the Cato Institute. In particular, Schmoke said he was influenced by Cato’s book *Liberating Schools—Education in the Inner City*, edited by David Boaz, then Cato’s executive vice president.

“That one I kept coming back to,” Schmoke told the *Baltimore Sun*, saying that he found himself underlining phrases such as “competitive market economy” and “tax credits or tax refunds for parents who want alternatives to the public school monopoly.”

In January 2004, Congress passed the first federally funded voucher program for low-income residents of Washington, DC. Many in Washington attributed the political dynamics that made it possible to Cato’s work in making the case for school choice.

Cato scholars have been a powerful voice for truly free markets in education and have been arguing for low regulation and embracing profit to take excellence to scale. That was largely the premise of the late senior fellow and former Center for Educational Freedom director Andrew Coulson’s PBS documentary, *School Inc.*

Apparently the film's message was so powerful that it inspired the nation's largest union, the National Education Association, to pass an "official position of objection to the 'documentary' called *School, Inc.*" at its 2017 national convention.

Victories had been piecemeal throughout Cato's decades of research, testimony, and advocacy. Then the combination of COVID-19 closures and educational culture wars shined a spotlight on the inability of public schools to serve diverse people equally and created an explosion in school choice within a few short years. More than 40 years of Cato's foundational research and discourse helped guide the course.

"That's what think tank work is often about: laying the groundwork for the day when political stars align," McCluskey says.

An Explosion in School Choice

Arizona was the first state to pass universal school choice in 2022. The program applies to everyone, not only to families below a certain income level or students assigned to low-performing schools. For Cato's education scholars, this was a long time coming.

"When I started working on school choice 22 years ago, it was a dream to have universal school choice," McCluskey says. "Even three years ago, most people didn't think these programs would ever happen, and now we

School Choice Stats

Families across the country are taking advantage of new school choice programs that fund students and help them access education that fits their needs.

- Over 850,000 students enrolled in private schools through school choice programs in 2023.
- Roughly 3.7 million children attend charter schools in the United States.
- Following the pandemic, private school enrollment increased by 4 percent and homeschool enrollment increased by 30 percent.
- As of 2020, the national average per pupil spending in public schools was \$14,789. The national average private school tuition in 2023 was \$12,686 per year.



Fumiko Tipping homeschools her two children, who now have access to new resources and opportunities thanks to Arizona's universal education savings accounts.

have at least 10 states with universal or near-universal school choice.”

As early as 2011, Cato policy scholars advocated universal ESAs—publicly funded, government-authorized accounts for expenses such as tuition, tutoring, textbooks, online education programs, and special needs therapies. According to McCluskey, it was the COVID-19 pandemic that influenced more people to start listening to school choice proponents.

“COVID opened even rich people’s eyes in many cases,” McCluskey says. “They were happy with public schools because they usually bought a home in a district with good schools and good test scores. But when COVID came, wealth didn’t matter. They realized it can all be taken away, even from them.”

Rather than fostering an environment for children of diverse backgrounds to be educated, public schooling often triggers conflicts with its one-size-fits-all approach to education. Since the mid-2000s, Cato’s Public Schooling Battle Map has cataloged significant conflicts related to basic rights, moral values, or individual identities. Between 2018 and 2020, there were an average of 203 battles tracked each year. Since 2020, that number has more than doubled to 437.

The political battles that play out in public schools came to the fore during and after the pandemic. Students, parents, teachers, and legislators fought intensely over school closures, curricula, reading material, and the ideological bias of classroom lessons.

For many parents, COVID-19 was a breaking point: private school enrollment increased by 4 percent in the year following

the pandemic, and homeschool enrollment increased by 30 percent, according to an Urban Institute report. And since 2020, after decades of little change in educational freedom, approximately half the states have enacted or expanded school choice programs.

“The dam has finally broken. People now know that the norm should be that you have a choice in education,” McCluskey says.

Educational Freedom for Arizona Families

Fumiko Tipping was raised in Arizona and attended public school until third grade, when racial discrimination and bullying convinced her mother to pull her out and homeschool her instead.

“The classes were too big for every student’s needs to be met,” Tipping recalls. “Kids get lost in the shuffle—and I was one of those kids.”

A single mom who worked nights at the hospital, Tipping’s mother did whatever it took to provide a quality education for her daughter. “She made it work,” Tipping says. “So, when it came time to educate my children, homeschooling was a no-brainer.”

Tipping began homeschooling her children in Ohio, where few resources were available to parents and students. In 2021, the Tippings moved to Prescott, Arizona, shortly before the state passed universal ESAs. For Tipping, who had never received any assistance before, this was a game-changer.

“We made the sacrifices necessary, which includes being a one-income household, so I can homeschool,” Tipping says. “I’ve sat on the floor in the grocery store counting out pages in notebooks to see which ones were



TOP: Akia McNeary with her children, from left, Raymone (22), Isaiah (17), Monae (8), and Nehemiah (14) outside their home in Florence, Kentucky.

BOTTOM: Fumiko Tipping poses for a photo in her living room with her son, Ittai (9), left, and daughter, Aria (12), right.



the best deal. With ESAs, suddenly we can afford to buy books! It changed our lives. It changed my kids' lives."

Tipping's 12-year-old daughter, Aria, who is already a school year ahead of her peers, has been able to join a local swim team thanks to ESAs. Nine-year-old Ittai is in gymnastics and has been able to get math manipulatives to help him with a subject that he previously struggled with. Both children complete classwork at a pace that matches their needs, with Fridays reserved for sports, Japanese lessons, and other extracurriculars.

"Kids are unique creatures, and even my two learn so differently," remarks Tipping. "My daughter is ahead of schedule—my son might need to keep working into the summer. That's fine. We can go slower for him. A stressed brain doesn't learn. Creating the most conducive environment for a child's specific learning needs is so important. We have that luxury, thanks to ESAs."

The Human Cost of School Choice Myths

The most frequently repeated school choice myth is that when a student leaves a public school under an ESA program, that student takes money and resources away from the public school and brings it to a private, often religious, school.

On the contrary, of the local, state, and federal dollars spent on public education, only the state funding follows the students within ESA programs (with a few exceptions). Therefore, much of the money remains in the public school system, and spending per pupil increases

as more parents opt for alternative forms of education. In the 2023–2024 school year, Arizona’s public schools were set to break the state record for spending at nearly \$15,000 per pupil. ESA students were to receive approximately \$7,000. That means more than 50 percent of the per-student funds likely stayed with the public school even when they no longer educated students using the ESA program.

School choice programs also aid in remedying one of the most common struggles expressed by public school teachers: class sizes. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there was an average of 23.9 students per Arizona public elementary teacher in 2018—among the nation’s highest. Now that ESAs have been expanded to all students in Arizona, the state’s Department of Education reports that over 70,000 students are taking advantage of the program. This shift is anticipated to drive down the average class size in Arizona’s public schools, benefiting students and teachers alike.

Robust school choice policies also serve public school teachers in another way. They open doors for teachers who are not satisfied in their school or district to have more opportunities to teach in other schools—or for founding new schools themselves.

Shiren Rattigan taught in public and private schools, but nothing was ever exactly what she was looking for. A fourth-generation educator, Rattigan saw herself like Ms. Frizzle from *The Magic School Bus*, whisking students away on unforgettable adventures and helping them discover the beauty of learning. Yet too often, the magic

was snuffed out in a system burdened by bureaucracy.

“I felt like every relationship in the education system was broken. My relationship with students was based on test performances; the only time I engaged with parents was when a problem needed to be addressed. The responsibility a school has to the community was lost,” Rattigan says.

Rattigan’s breaking point came during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures. She observed as a parent and a teacher how incapable the education system was at meeting the needs of students. When discussions began about returning to in-person learning, Rattigan was resolved to make a more significant change. “I didn’t wait my whole life to clean sneeze guards,” she says. “I wanted to be an educator. I wanted to embrace the opportunity to stretch education to a beautiful new place, but I was so limited.”

Rattigan knew if she was going to feel at home in a school, she would have to build it herself.

What started as Rattigan educating her three daughters at home during school closures led to preparing a weekly schoolwork kit for other parents struggling with homeschooling during the pandemic. Soon the families started meeting once a week, and then twice. Eventually, parents asked Rattigan what it would take for her to continue teaching their kids rather than sending them back to the Montessori school they were attending. And so, Colossal Academy was born.

“I wanted to offer this opportunity to more children and be accessible to a



diverse socioeconomic background,” she says. “I decided the best way to do that was to become a licensed private school and participate in Florida’s school choice scholarship program.”

Across the nation, educators like Rattigan are redefining education, and Cato is amplifying their voices. Cato policy analyst Colleen Hroncich writes the weekly *Friday Feature* blog chronicling stories of educational entrepreneurship to inspire students, parents, and teachers.

“An underappreciated benefit is that school choice legislation empowers teachers,” Hroncich says. “They see the need every day, and for the first time, many can now fill it.”

Rattigan aims to franchise Colossal Academy, starting with every county in Florida. She wants to help other

teachers navigate the world of education entrepreneurship so that more schools that put the magic back into learning can be available to students everywhere.

Building on Success

While the general public increasingly shares Cato’s enthusiasm for the benefits of universal ESAs, their expansion wouldn’t solve all the problems with our education system overnight. Some states that have passed ESA legislation, such as Nevada and Iowa, hinder the program’s success with stringent state regulations on private schools.

“The protectionism of regulations on private schools makes their ESAs little more than a glorified voucher system,” says Kerry McDonald, adjunct scholar for the Cato Institute and author of *Unschooling: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children outside the*

Shiren Rattigan, right, founded Colossal Academy in Fort Lauderdale, Florida after frustration as an educator during the pandemic. Colossal has expanded to welcome high school students, and Rattigan is looking to open more locations in the coming years.

Conventional Classroom. “The threat now that they have passed universal ESA legislation without addressing the huge barriers to opening new schools is that people will think no one wanted to take advantage of the program when given the choice. We must remove barriers to education entrepreneurship so that the supply can match the demand we know is there.”

Education entrepreneur Bob Luddy has experienced those barriers firsthand.

“If you’re starting a private school, one of the hardest hoops is to get the school building approved by the state and local code authorities,” Luddy says.

Luddy founded his company, CaptiveAire Systems, in North Carolina in 1976. As the company grew through the 1990s and 2000s, he struggled to find qualified workers. “We had individuals working in the plant who could understand one inch or two inches but not fractions,” he says. “It shocked me.”

Luddy says his anger motivated him to start his own school in 2007 in a temporary building located on his company’s property. What began with 30 students meeting in a CaptiveAire office building has since grown into Thales Academy—a private school franchise serving more than 6,100 K–12 students across 13 locations in North Carolina and Virginia.

Being a business entrepreneur gave him an edge when it came to launching and scaling a private school. But Luddy says the ability to self-fund Thales Academy was

pivotal. “I had the money and resources to do this,” he says. “Most don’t.”

While opening the newest Thales Academy in Midlothian, Virginia, Luddy was required by the state’s Department of Transportation to build a roundabout and place a stoplight outside the school—at the cost of \$280,000.

“I self-fund all of this. I do this because it breaks my heart to see young people who don’t have opportunities in life that I had,” Luddy says. “If we can’t resolve K–12 education, we can’t resolve any other problem in this country.”

The dedication of education entrepreneurs gives Cato scholar McDonald optimism for the future of school choice. “Supply has been increasing everywhere since 2020, and there is growing bipartisan support across the country,” she says.

Despite resistance in some states, momentum is on the side of school choice, and much of that is due to Cato’s work, other key organizations in the school choice movement, and individuals who advocate school choice in their states, like Akia McNeary of Kentucky. She knows exactly what ESAs would do for her kids: tutoring, college prep, or fulfilling her son’s dream of attending a science adventure week that is currently out of the family’s budget.

When asked what ESAs would give to a mother exhausted by ensuring her children get the education they need and lobbying for the options they deserve, McNeary says, “It would be a break.” ♦