

EXPANDING THE EDUCATION UNIVERSE: A FIFTY-STATE STRATEGY FOR COURSE CHOICE

by Michael Brickman

INTRODUCTION

For families seeking more than their child's assigned school offers, "school choice" has long been one cherished solution. And it's been making strong headway on the U.S. education-policy front. Millions of girls and boys now enjoy access to a range of educational options thanks to innovative school-choice policies.

Sometimes, however, changing schools isn't the optimal solution—whether because no better options are available within a reasonable commute, the state doesn't have a viable choice policy, or the student's present school is satisfactory in all but a couple of areas.

Enter course choice, a strategy for widening the education options available to youngsters. It has the potential to dramatically expand access to high-quality courses for many more children from many more backgrounds and locales than we have thus far managed.

Rather than asking kids in need of a better shake to change homes, forsake their friends, or take long bus rides, course choice enables them to learn from

the best teachers in the state or nation. And it grants them access to an array of course offerings that no one school can realistically gather under its roof. It also offers something for schools and teachers: a new revenue opportunity for schools and additional income for public-school teachers. How many Sal Khans are in our schools today just waiting for an opportunity to teach online?

As might be expected, online learning is part of the package, but course choice goes further: it allows K–12 students to learn from unconventional providers that might range from top-tier universities or innovative community colleges to local employers, labs, or hospitals. Moreover, these options can meet students where they are—in terms of geography, interest, and prior achievement—and, if designed properly, can fit the political and cultural contours of each community. What follows is a guide to help lawmakers and education leaders devise course-choice policies for their states that are ambitious yet pragmatic.

In devising such policies, state officials will need to tackle and resolve knotty questions about funding levels, what sorts of courses should be offered, which students may participate, and how course providers (and pupils themselves) can be held accountable for results. This paper seeks to help frame the options and explain some of the advantages and disadvantages that come with them. And it spotlights early-adopter Louisiana to show how that state's lawmakers chose to answer such questions.

Course choice is no cure-all. It will face its own political hurdles and implementation challenges. And traditional school choice is still a worthy strategy for pupils whose present schools are struggling academically or ill-suited to their interests and circumstances. But well-wrought course-choice policies have the potential to customize learning and widen educational opportunities for millions more youngsters across America.

EXPANDING COURSE CHOICES AND ACCESS

Over the past two decades, opportunities for students to access the school of their choice have expanded by leaps and bounds. Yet this is just one tool for improving education, and changing one's school isn't the only possible way to improve upon one's instructional alternatives.

Education reformers often talk of the need for a different delivery paradigm—an alternative to the familiar model of a flesh-and-blood teacher standing before twenty-five desks, delivering a lecture-style lesson during 1 of 7 forty-two-minute class periods over some 180 days a year. Yet today that's still what most kids get. More is needed. Those students who are happy with their existing school and want to remain there, but would benefit from additional options need an answer.

Course choice could change the game by enabling children to remain in their accustomed schools while taking some of their courses from other providers. This pattern is well established in U.S. higher education and has begun to change the K–12 sector, where virtual courses and dual-enrollment opportunities have been available to some children

for years. Other states are moving to allow youngsters to leave school for part of the day to take additional courses from nontraditional providers, such as tutoring companies or private businesses. Still others are already finding ways to bring these courses directly to students by making classroom teachers into adjunct university faculty who can offer dual-credit classes, or by changing teacher licensure laws to bring more of the knowledge and experience from the outside community into the schools.

Such options have spread as lawmakers in a handful of states have agreed to allow students and parents to shop online for courses from multiple sources, much as they might do when booking a trip or choosing clothes. No longer must a small or remote school be cramped in the courses that its students can take. The potential is there to widen the horizons of learning—but to date most states have barely scratched the surface.

The possibilities are extraordinary. A student might reap the benefits of high-quality educational options by taking most of his courses at his neighborhood school, but then go to an online course catalog to

select an AP U.S. History class, an advanced course in art history at the local community college, and a remedial course in mathematics from a tutoring firm. Course choice makes it possible for such students to customize their education.¹ For the first time, schools—aided and enriched by outside course providers—can truly be all things (or at least most things) to all of their pupils.

But plenty of decisions lie ahead. With course choice, as with school choice, there's ample evidence that the American public favors the concept. It's the detailed policies and associated politics that give rise to discord—and that call for thoughtful policymaking.

Communicating With Parents and Students

States that have already adopted course-choice programs indicate that communication has been an unexpected challenge. The vast majority of parents in these states are not yet aware that such an option exists for their children; what's more, there are even disturbing reports of school-district administrators who intentionally mislead families about course availability in order to protect their bottom line. Policymakers should devise smart policies to help disseminate course-choice information to the parents and students. That might involve a requirement that parents be notified about the new program by the school district, though such state-mandated notifications already exist and information nonetheless gets buried. States may also consider allocating public funds or developing a public-private partnership to advertise the program.

BALANCING COMPETING INTERESTS

The biggest tension is apt to arise over the question of control—of options, of resources, of children’s education programs, and of quality. Is course choice mainly a resource for schools to deploy—under their control? Or is it mainly something that families should be free to exercise as they see fit, outside the constraints of brick-and-mortar schools and districts? Or is it some combination of the two?

A related tension: where should course-choice policies originate? States are not the only possibility. A growing number of districts, schools, and even classrooms have enacted local versions by taking advantage of high-quality but low-cost (or free) online resources.² Some districts have also developed partnerships with local colleges and universities (though sometimes these financial arrangements tend to benefit existing institutions more than the students they serve). The next step for bold district-level leaders will be to enact policies that seek out the best content, regardless of source, and deliver it to their students in order to provide the best education possible. They need not wait for their states to initiate such changes.

The third tension: who pays? Traditionally, school districts are responsible for both running and paying for their schools (with significant support from state and federal governments), and some critics insist that any other arrangement represents a perilous move toward “privatization.” But in many instances, these course providers are non-profits or even other schools. For that matter, what if they’re colleges or nonprofit groups? Does the child’s school district pay the cost? Does the state? The parents? Who decides what price is reasonable? How many kids can take how many such courses? Who controls this money? Who generates it?

Tension four: whose students are these, anyway? What if Molly takes all but one or two of her courses from course providers? Is she still a student at Madison High School? Does it still confer her diploma? Is it still the school’s job to determine whether she has truly fulfilled state or district graduation requirements? If not the school, then who? For that matter, even if Molly takes just one or two courses from outside sources, who determines whether she has truly “passed” them—and met the state’s standards for those subjects? Who confers her grade? How does that grade figure into her GPA or get reported to colleges she may want to attend?

None of these questions is trivial and none will be satisfactorily answered without serious consideration, weighing of options, and resolution of controversies over power, money, responsibility, and more. The rest of this paper is intended to frame some of the key alternatives available to policymakers working their way through such dilemmas associated with course choice. We acknowledge that it’s complicated. But we’re convinced that it’s worth working out. We take for granted that states will reach different decisions, according to their needs, their resources, their political circumstances—and their courage.

DIFFERENT COURSES FOR DIFFERENT STUDENTS, DIFFERENT POLICIES FOR DIFFERENT STATES

1 WHICH STUDENTS ARE ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?

Due to funding limitations, political realities, or other factors, states may wish to limit enrollment to certain categories of students. Perhaps others can also take part but at their own expense.

a) Age. Participation in course choice is apt to be greatest among high-school students, whose education is typically denominated in individual “courses” and who often have “electives” in their schedules. But there’s no reason to bar others. In the earlier grades, course choice may be particularly beneficial within regular classrooms—where it might, for example, assist special-needs youngsters, gifted pupils, and those with particular interests such as foreign languages. It may also assist teachers seeking to “differentiate” the instruction program for their dissimilar pupils and/or introduce “blended learning.” A state might prefer to phase in the younger grades as it masters implementation of course choice at the high-school level. Or, in the interest of maximizing options and inviting innovation, states may wish to enable all students, regardless of age, to enroll (as Wisconsin’s Course Options program does).³

b) Means tested. Courses might be limited to students from low-income families or from schools with high concentrations of poverty or other disadvantage.

c) Low-performing school. Pupils enrolled in low-performing schools would have the option to take courses originating elsewhere (somewhat akin to “supplemental services” under NCLB, though

policymakers will also want to learn from some of the missteps of this federal program).

d) Student not enrolled in district schools.

From charters to those who are homeschooled or attend private schools at their own expense, states will need to determine whether and to what extent these youngsters can participate. Inasmuch as they are typically outside the existing funding formulae, states must also determine how to cover such costs.

e) Specialized populations. Eligibility might be limited to students with particular needs or special circumstances, such as those with disabilities, English-language learners, gifted children, students in need of remediation, and so on.

f) Pilot program. States may opt to pilot the program by initially limiting it to a set number of students or courses per student. This approach can help administrators work out kinks and control the fiscal impact.

2 WHICH PROVIDERS ARE ELIGIBLE TO OFFER COURSES?

The issue here is how many—and which—course providers will be made available to students seeking to unbundle their education. Parents and kids will naturally want the widest possible range. Districts, however, will tend to favor tighter limits, whether out of concern for quality control or to minimize competition with their own offerings. States will also have to balance the desire to serve more children with the political headache that inevitably comes

when “controversial” course providers are included. Or they may leave such decisions to districts or entrust them to third parties.

In any case, a process must be created to determine which providers will be included and which ones will not. Further, after deciding which broad categories of courses below will be included, states will almost certainly need to develop a quality control mechanism to screen out bad providers before they are allowed into the program—and hold accountable for results the ones who make it in. The criteria that might be considered (by department of education staff, outside experts, or others) could include a record of past academic success in line with state standards and goals, a plan for future academic results and financial stability, and proof that children will be learning in a safe environment. Finally, this approval mechanism might be set up to vet providers, their individual courses, or both. These processes will vary from state to state; the ones developed by one course-choice state, Louisiana, are described in more detail in the Appendix.

a) Public schools. States could start here and allow students to enroll physically or online in courses offered by other (charter, virtual, or traditional) public schools. These will include district-sponsored courses as well as, potentially, those run by regional public-school service entities, or the state itself (as in the Florida Virtual School).

b) Private schools. Including private schools as course providers increases options for kids—and some of those options might be highly appealing and of solid quality. Why not “Andover Poetry” or “Sidwell Friends Trigonometry”?

c) Four-year colleges and universities. Many states already have dual-enrollment programs that allow students to earn college credit while in high school. Some of these programs are clunky in execution; some, for example,

require individual memoranda of understanding between school district and university. Yet simplified versions of such agreements should be achievable by most states, as they integrate existing dual-enrollment programs into a broader set of course offerings.

d) Community colleges. The added advantage here is that community colleges are often close-at-hand, enterprising, inexpensive, and flexible—plus, their courses may transfer to a four-year program. In addition, many offer technical and trade programs not readily available elsewhere.

e) Nonprofit organizations. These might include job-training centers run by a charity or union; an education program offered by the local planetarium, science, or art museum; a proven purveyor of online content (such as Khan Academy); or a well-known entity like the National Geographic Society. Some states will take all comers; others may screen out religious groups and those with ideological or political orientations.

f) For-profit organizations. These may be giant Fortune 500 companies or small local firms. The programs they offer could range from industry-recognized certifications (such as from Microsoft or the National Association of Manufacturers) to apprenticeships with a small business seeking to bolster its workforce pipeline to a company offering education products (such as Rosetta Stone’s foreign language software). States may shun all of these due to the “for-profit” label—but it’s worth noting that regular public-school courses commonly use instructional materials (e.g., textbooks, worksheets, and software) acquired from such firms.

g) Out-of-state providers. With online marketplaces allowing us to purchase all manner of goods and services tailored to our individual needs at prices that we can afford, it’s

remarkable how limited today's education options are in many places. States might also consider creating a multi-state clearinghouse for courses. Such a system would glean an array of the best content approved by other states' course-choice programs. States could then develop reciprocity agreements, whereby a course approved in Oklahoma would be sanctioned in Ohio, and vice-versa.

h) Other providers. The categories above do not exhaust all the possibilities. One can easily picture high quality, carefully vetted courses imported from other countries (e.g., "Singapore Math," "Italian Art History"). Massive open online course (MOOC) developers could dip below the college level. All-star, enterprising teachers could develop their own courses—and be well compensated for them. Public TV and radio stations or magazine and newspaper publishers could play a role. States may be wise to create a "miscellaneous" category, then allow the state board of education or other entity the discretion to approve proposals, perhaps course by course, bearing in mind that some providers won't have existed at the time the policy was enacted.

3 WHO PAYS?

Should course-choice courses be funded out of the regular education formula or from a separate appropriation? Directly by the state? Some of the factors listed elsewhere in this paper (e.g., "*Which students will be eligible?*") could also determine the cost of course choice and its fiscal impact on districts and states.

a) Separate appropriation. The program would be funded through its own pot of money (funds that must, of course, be found in the state budget), not taken from the regular state education fund or from a district's allocation. Advocates in one state said district opposition

to course choice diminished once policymakers devised a fiscal mechanism by which to hold local education agencies harmless. The obvious downside is that the state then "pays twice."

b) Funds drawn from general education fund.

The money to fund all course-choice participation in the state would flow directly to providers from the main state K–12 appropriation. These funds would be subtracted (in whole or in part) from a district's allocation of state dollars based on how many students from that district take part in course choice. The advantage is that the state can easily and fairly distribute funds based on enrollment in districts as well as course choice. Districts will resist the drop in revenue and their loss of control over student participation—but may wind up with more money per remaining FTE pupil, since the state's payment to course-choice providers is apt to be less than it would otherwise send to the district.

c) Districts fund courses. The district would pay for courses for those living within its borders (or attending its schools) from whatever funding source it chooses. It is more straightforward for districts to cover the cost of courses taken by their pupils, even if those courses are taken from other providers. And this approach retains control and budgeting at the district level. But districts may still resist; at a minimum, they will likely want to hold down payments to alternative providers in order to cover their own fixed costs.

Table 1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Various Funding Decisions

	Likely to upset school districts	Requires new funding stream	Allows for greater district flexibility	Closely ties funding to the student
a) Separate appropriation	–	✓	–	–
b) Take from state fund	✓	–	–	✓
c) Take from district funds	✓	–	✓	✓

4 HOW MUCH FUNDING PER COURSE?

Even though answering this question may seem as straightforward as assigning a dollar amount to each course, the reality is more complex. Pay too generously, and course providers may simply raise the price of their offerings. Pay too little, and high-quality providers may not materialize. These decisions will also determine whether there are “savings” left over for regular schools after alternative providers are paid and, if so, whether those savings are distributed to the state, the district, the parents (as in the case of an Education Savings Account), or some combination of the three. Nor is it clear that every course should be funded at the same level when their actual costs are bound to differ widely. States could consider several alternatives.

- a) Fixed price.** Each course is funded at a uniform rate. Simple, yes, but does not account for the fact that a hands-on technical-education course (such as on-site work in a robotics lab) obviously costs more than an online algebra course. Moreover, when the price is fixed in statute or administrative rule, it may be difficult to change if needed.
- b) FTE fraction.** Each course is funded at a fraction (typically one-sixth or one-seventh, with the denominator representing the number

of courses in a traditional semester) of an amount tied to average state (or state and local) funding, or the amount provided for a student who transfers to a charter school or another public school district. As with the first option, this is simple, and has the added advantage of being pegged to previously agreed-upon funding policies. But it also fails to account for differences in course costs.

c) Tiered funding. Courses are funded using either of the first two mechanisms but individual courses are reimbursed at different rates. Utah, for example, pays \$200 for a semester of financial literacy but \$350 for a core math or English course. This helps to address a problem with the first two options.⁴

d) Provider-determined. The course provider, not the state, sets the price of each course that it offers. This has the key advantage of allowing providers to compete based on price. But what’s to keep them from overcharging, particularly when consumer and payer are not the same? If the district pays, for example, but cannot control the price, a parent or student will have every incentive to choose the highest-priced courses. Districts will likely see it as a slippery slope leading to runaway expenses.

e) Flexible spending account. Parents would receive a set amount of funding as determined by options a, b, or c in a special draw-down account. As with option d, the provider sets the course price, but the consumer—rather than the district—decides what is worth the cost. The key difference is that parents could take any remaining funds in the savings account and roll them over to the next school year, or perhaps into a college savings account. This would encourage consumers to be frugal with their spending. However, unlike a traditional education savings account,⁵ there'd be no bar to a student enrolling in a traditional public school for some or most of his courses. In many ways, this is the most radical option. It could fundamentally change a state's education system if parents are truly given control of all (or most of) the public funds devoted to their child's education and are free to decide where to spend them.

Competency Progression

What happens when a student who is enrolled in a traditional school completes her online, accelerated math course halfway through the traditional semester? States might also consider a policy that allows for competency-based completion of course-choice courses when warranted—meaning that students have the right to take the final exam or complete all required assignments at their own pace in order to demonstrate mastery of the content. Allowing students to move subsequently to the next course could benefit the most motivated, but could also have funding implications.

Table 2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Various Funding Models

	Simplicity	Tied to existing state funding policy	Allows price to change over time	Accounts for variability in course cost	Allows for some price competition	More likely to prevent overpricing
a) Fixed price	✓	–	–	✓ – <i>(yes if combined with option c)</i>	–	–
b) FTE fraction	✓	✓	✓	✓ – <i>(yes if combined with option c)</i>	–	–
c) Tiered funding	–	–	–	✓	–	–
d) Provider-determined	–	–	✓	✓	✓	–
e) Flexible spending account	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✓

5 QUALITY CONTROL AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Under any form of publicly financed education, including a course-choice regime, policymakers must determine how providers will be held accountable for their results. They must also create a process whereby student achievement is measured and certified. As a recent report by the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) states clearly, “The fact that we don’t have outcomes-based quality assurance means we don’t know how well online schools and courses are educating students.”⁶ Online or otherwise, course-choice programs will be closely scrutinized from many directions.

Accountability is best thought of under two headings. Part I considers how students using course choice have their performance evaluated and how it may count toward promotion, graduation, and so on. Part II examines how the providers themselves might be held accountable for the quality of their work. Of course, there will be overlap, as providers should certainly be judged—in large part—on the performance of their students.

Part I: Standards for student learning

When designing a course-choice program, policymakers must determine whether students enrolled in a given course have mastered sufficient content to move from course to course, year to year, and ultimately to graduate. This question may be answered by parents (as it is when children are homeschooled) or providers (as it is when teachers and schools confer grades and degrees). However, where that responsibility rests must be unambiguous if such a system is likely to have any credibility with the public.

a) Provider-determined accountability.

Providers determine when a given pupil has satisfactorily completed a course. This approach is obviously simple from the state and district perspective, and will be welcomed by providers,

but it may also tempt them to set low standards or excuse weak performance in order to maximize enrollments. As a result, providers must be incentivized to set high standards for their students—and themselves be monitored—through one of the “accountability for course providers” options in the next section.

b) End-of-course exams. Under this model, students would be required to pass the state’s (or district’s) end-of-course exam for the pertinent subject, regardless of who provided the course to them. Besides determining the progress of individual pupils, such exam results could be used to inform parents and the public, sanction chronic low-performing providers, or be combined with other options to provide a more comprehensive approach.⁷

The obvious limitation is that no state or district has end-of-course exams or other standard assessments for every course that a student might take under a course-choice regime. We often measure learning in core subjects like English and math but hardly ever in a French course, for example, other than a teacher-administered semester exam or AP test. It’s even more complicated in technical and artistic fields and with courses designed for “special populations.”⁸

c) School-determined accountability. Here, determinations as to whether a student has passed a course mostly rest with the student’s public school or district, which must ultimately determine whether to confer credit, diplomas, promotions, and such. The school might rely on a combination of measures, including the provider’s evaluation of that student, its overall confidence in the provider, state accountability data, and so on. It also might create its own exam or “portfolio review” session. These options resemble the ways that schools have long determined whether a pupil’s “independent

study” or “home study” was done satisfactorily and whether it should “count” for credit. In some subjects, this may be straightforward. For example, a Spanish teacher could certainly certify a student’s successful achievement in an externally provided Spanish course that is more advanced than what the school itself offers. But there will be challenges when, for instance, a student takes an outside course in agricultural science while otherwise attending a school that has no such expertise. (After all, a major reason to take advantage of course choice is to study subjects that one’s school doesn’t offer.) In such instances, the school will likely need to rely on some sort of external validation.

certifications could be earned from a college or university, trade group, union, or individual company. Such an arrangement is already familiar via Advanced Placement exams, where the teacher runs the course but the College Board certifies satisfactory completion and the high school (and, perhaps, the college) awards credit. In many ways, the use of badges and certifications in an accountability system makes this option similar to the first option in this section, in that it is market-driven. The difference is that students are aiming for an independent (and potentially state-approved) method of recognizing specific skills and competencies. It will be up to these independent groups to prove the worth of their certifications.

d) Third-party review. States could gauge student outcomes based on their obtaining external certifications or “badges.”⁹ Such

Table 3. Advantages and Disadvantages of Different Models for Measuring Student Learning

	Relies on independent measure of learning	Focuses on mastery in specific subject	Is easier for state to implement	Favors free market	Favors local control
a) Provider-determined standards	–	✓	✓	✓	–
b) End-of-course exams	✓	✓	–	–	–
c) School-determined accountability	✓ – <i>(depends on local design)</i>	✓	✓	–	✓
d) Third-party review	✓	✓	–	✓	–

Part II: Accountability for course providers

In addition to ensuring that students are learning, states have reason to concern themselves with the reliability and quality of providers. Many will be well established with a proven track record of results in other education realms. Others might be entities that have not worked in this space before—some might even be brand-new start-ups. States will need to consider how providers—and their actual courses—are initially vetted and subsequently monitored. This could include a spectrum of options ranging from a hands-off, free-market approach to an in-depth appraisal of the organization providing courses and the content of the courses themselves.¹⁰

a) Market-based accountability. Under this model, the consumers themselves—parents and students—drive accountability. The market—not the government—decides which providers stay and which go. The upside is that this approach allows parents maximum latitude to choose the right courses without state interference. Some courses, after all, might be wrong for 99 percent of students but right for their own child. For this to work well, however, as in school choice, parents need to be engaged and informed consumers in markets where they may not previously have shopped—markets in which it’s also the state’s job to help fend off purveyors of snake oil.

As with online rating systems on sites like Amazon or Yelp, the experience of previous consumers can help drive students toward quality and away from lackluster courses. There may be either a state or private role here in helping to disseminate such information, perhaps through an online portal or by providing expert recommendations from educators and others.

Performance-based Funding

Once a means for holding providers generally accountable is established, the state may wish to add a system of funding-based accountability, whereby some funds are withheld from providers until a student satisfactorily completes the course. States might also choose to reward providers that see students through to completion even after the term is over. States could set the “reward” for completion at anywhere from a minor bonus to the entirety of the funding. A higher percentage could serve as a stronger incentive for propelling students toward completion, but one too high might induce small providers with less on-hand cash to opt out. The other disadvantage to this approach is that using funding as a reward for completion might incentivize providers to cherry-pick the best students.¹¹

b) Performance-based accountability. Under this model, providers are held accountable based on the performance of their students (as determined by one or more of the options selected in the prior section). In essence, provider performance will be judged by the aggregate of how well their students do. (If state policymakers choose this option, of course, they should pick one in the prior section other than “provider-determined accountability,” since giving providers full control over the means to hold them accountable would defeat the purpose of an accountability system.)

c) Accreditation or expert review. Under this model, providers and/or individual courses would be subject to a form of accreditation similar to what programs in colleges and universities undergo. In fact, when a previously accredited education entity, such as a college, is the course-choice provider, its existing credential might serve as a sufficient eligibility marker. Standards set by iNACOL could be another.¹²

Accreditation is simpler than expert review but could open the floodgates to poor-quality courses offered by providers willing to show off their best material in order to gain approval to enter the market. The latter is more thorough, but requires more resources and a greater degree of expertise, as someone would need to vet and review each course in every subject offered. (That cost, though, could be significantly defrayed via the participation of a multi-state clearinghouse, as discussed above.)

Although an expert review process includes much focus on inputs (whether, for example, the providers seem reputable or financially solvent and the course is rigorous and appropriate), states might also consider a periodic review of existing providers and courses that examines student outcomes. This process could range from assessing a representative sample of students in each course to pairing this option with option b (performance-based accountability), in order to get a fuller picture of student performance. Such a process of combining both inputs and outcomes could be designed to closely resemble the process for authorizing charter schools.

Table 4. Advantages and Disadvantages of Various Accountability Policies

	Screens out bad actors systematically	Relies on academic outcomes	Is easier for state to implement	Favors free market
a) Market-based accountability	–	–	✓	✓
b) Performance-based accountability	–	✓	✓	–
c) Accreditation or expert review	✓	✓ –	–	–

CONCLUSION

Policymakers, like students, should enjoy the benefits of customization. Course-choice policies should look very different in Vermont than in Utah—not because one state or another is doing it “correctly,” but because the correct solution varies based on the reality of on-the-ground politics and policy in each place. Once multiple course-choice programs are enacted, each state can and should refine its policies to optimize access and quality. This process of continual innovation will allow each state to provide a broader set of course offerings for its students and a greater opportunity for them to thrive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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APPENDIX: COURSE CHOICE IN LOUISIANA

Louisiana is not the only state with a course-choice program (other programs that might be considered “course choice” exist in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin¹³) but it is the furthest along in making a broad course-choice program a reality—and its challenges make it an ideal case study. Any new initiative comes with its difficulties, but a recent Supreme Court ruling—which blocked the system’s funding mechanism—erected additional barriers that State Superintendent John White and other leaders have had to overcome (more below). In the 2013–14 school year, the first year of the program, Louisiana was able to gather about \$2 million from other sources to serve 2,000 students (at roughly \$1,000 per course, though the price per course varies widely).¹⁴ So far, students are able to choose from twenty-one different providers offering everything from Advanced Placement, to hands-on CTE courses, to test-prep for the ACT.^{15, 16}

Despite numerous hurdles, Louisiana has found a way to ensure that students are able to enroll in courses. It is likely that the state legislature will make improvements to the program in subsequent years.

POLICY DESIGN

Here is how Louisiana answered many of the course-choice design questions posed above:

Which students are eligible to participate? Any student in a school graded C, D, or F; a student eligible for a voucher; or a student hoping to take a course not offered by his or her home school district is eligible for a state-funded course. Other students, including homeschoolers, may participate in the initiative but must pay for their courses. Students receiving state funding, however, must still take at least one course from their school district, but the

district (at least for the moment) has no say over how many other or which courses the student can take, so long as they are not already offered by the district. Beginning next year, however, this is likely to change; instead, school districts could determine which students in grades 7–12 would be allowed to take which courses.¹⁷ Additionally, school guidance counselors must certify that a student’s enrollment in the course would be academically appropriate, logistically feasible, and would keep the student on track for on-time graduation.¹⁸

Which providers will be eligible? The program allows both brick-and-mortar or virtual providers that are approved by the state, including providers of K–12 course work, postsecondary education institutions, and companies that make their “vocational or technical course work” available.

Who pays? The Louisiana experience with course choice makes this issue complicated but also underscores its importance. Legislators and the governor initially designed the program so that funds would follow the child from the school-district allocation, but the state would be responsible for sending the funding to the course provider. The Louisiana Supreme Court blocked this funding mechanism because it circumvented the state’s constitutionally mandated structure, under which funds generally go through school districts. In the meantime, the state has been forced to run the program as a pilot, using existing state funds over and above what the districts were already getting.¹⁹

How much funding per course? Prices are set by the course provider, but with a ceiling per course set at one-sixth of 90 percent of the funding for a child in her school district. Students are not limited in the number of courses they can take, so long

as they stay within the funding cap. Still, some of the education savings account-like features (i.e., allowing parents to put leftover funds into a college savings account) are not included.²⁰

How does the state measure results and hold providers accountable?

The Louisiana Department of Education has a number of mechanisms in place to hold providers accountable. Providers must first undergo an expert review process to determine whether their courses can be offered. Under state policy, course providers submit to a full vetting process that involves a detailed application and interviews with an expert panel. These providers are subsequently reviewed annually or as needed based on a provider-by-provider set of evaluation metrics. Course providers are then renewed after the first three years (for a period likely between three and five additional years) based on student academic performance and other factors, such as suitability of agreed-upon course learning objectives.²¹ Louisiana also employs funding-based accountability, by which 50 percent of allocated dollars are withheld until a student completes the course. The provider can still recoup 40 percent of the total if a student completes the course after the established deadline has passed.²² Students are also still tested under the state accountability system.

ENDNOTES

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