



# Empowering Parents with School Choice Reduces Wokeism in Education

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Charter schools and private schools sometimes push woke ideas like public schools do, raising concern about whether expanding school choice will reduce wokeism.

Measuring how woke charter schools are across states shows that when schools are more accountable to parents than to regulators, the less woke those schools are.

Empowering parents with expanded school choice while remaining vigilant against regulation will significantly reduce woke indoctrination in education.

American K–12 education is currently mired in an unmistakable radical leftward lurch.<sup>1</sup> Whether changing the pronouns of students without informing their parents,<sup>2</sup> eradicating academic standards in the name of “equity,”<sup>3</sup> infusing ahistorical curricula meant to engender contempt for the United States,<sup>4</sup> or lobbying the Department of Justice to label anyone who opposes any of the former “domestic terrorists,”<sup>5</sup> progressive activists are increasingly able to use America’s schools as a tool for advancing their woke agenda.

Those concerned about these trends have been in debate about how best to curb this “wokeism” in education. Some argue that empowering parents by expanding school choice is the best strategy for re-aligning schools’ values and priorities with those of parents. As Inez Feltscher Stepman put it: “School

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choice is the only reform that finally connects parental discontent with the only thing the people running large, well-funded systems actually care about: a diminished paycheck.”<sup>6</sup>

Since parents, on average, demand far less wokeism than schools supply, shifting more power to parents will reverse this leftward lurch of the education system. Poll results confirm that most Americans hold negative views of woke classroom endeavors, such as the 1619 Project and critical race theory, and indeed opposition to race essentialism, gender theory, and other progressive projects helped to fuel the rapid expansion of school choice programs across the country over the past two years.<sup>7</sup>

However, the degree to which school choice programs are designed to satisfy parental rather than elite preferences might make a critical difference. Indeed, some conservative skeptics of school choice are raising alarm that choice could exacerbate wokeism in American schools if choice programs succumb to regulatory capture by the radical Left.<sup>8</sup> These skeptics tend to favor direct political action, such as banning the teaching of critical race theory in schools, over expanding school choice as the preferred tactic for combatting wokeism.

Of course, there is no reason why people could not pursue both strategies, empowering parents through the expansion of school choice and advancing policies that directly limit political indoctrination. But movements must make choices about which arguments to emphasize and how best to allocate political resources, so the debate over strategy remains important.

At the heart of this debate is an empirical claim that can be tested. Does giving parents greater control over choosing their children’s schools actually reduce how woke those chosen schools tend to be? If it does, then expanding school choice offers greater promise given the difficulty of getting a recalcitrant school system to comply with direct bans on woke indoctrination. If, however, parental control over chosen schools makes little or no difference, the skeptics may be right that expanding choice could fail to combat radical ideology in the classroom, even if it helps families in other ways.<sup>9</sup>

In the novel study in this *Backgrounders*, we address this question by examining whether more stringently regulated charter school markets are more woke than comparatively less regulated markets. In more regulated charter markets, charter schools are more beholden to the preferences of authorizers and other regulators. In less regulated markets, however, schools should be more answerable to parents than regulators. If we observe that charter schools tend to be significantly less woke in markets where those schools are more accountable to parents, then strong evidence exists that parental choice is effective at controlling wokeism in education.

We devised a wokeness measure that is calculated by searching publicly available parent-student handbooks and tabulating their usage of certain keywords (such as gender identity, justice, and equity) that could signal affirmation of fashionable progressive theories about teaching and learning. We then observed how these measures correlate with charter school state rankings issued by the Center for Education Reform (CER), which assigns a score according to the degree to which the state charter sector is controlled by parental preferences rather than those of regulators.

Overall, we observed that schools in states with more government regulation and oversight are more woke, and that this is true even after controlling for the partisan leanings of states as proxied by voting margins in the last presidential election. In other words, elite preferences are more woke than parental preferences, an observation that highlights the need for empowering parents through the expansion of school choice while maintaining vigilance against regulatory capture.

## The K-12 School Context

Progressives have enjoyed near monopolistic control of universities for decades.<sup>10</sup> Now, it is clear that they have their sights set on K-12 schools. The unprecedented ability of parents to directly observe classroom teaching during pandemic school shutdowns as well as some teachers unapologetically broadcasting their political beliefs through social media have laid bare the extent to which radical leftist theories inform classroom instruction. All of this has occurred with the blessing of the two largest teachers unions, which affirm their support of critical race theory<sup>11</sup> and allege that standardized testing is racist,<sup>12</sup> while still asserting that conservatives are responsible for politicizing education.<sup>13</sup>

The phenomenon is not unique to schools in locales that are politically progressive. Wokeism also is not unique to traditional public schools. Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools have dropped the motto “Work hard. Be nice” because it does not “dismantle systemic racism.”<sup>14</sup> Some elite private schools are even more explicit than public schools about the degree to which “social justice” defines the school ethos.<sup>15</sup>

## The Charter School Context

The first charter school was established 30 years ago and there are now more than 7,500 charters across the 45 states that allow their operation. Charters emerged through a bipartisan coalition of education reformers,

and as privately run schools with public funding and variable levels of government oversight, they were viewed as a compromise between vouchers and preservation of the status quo public school monopoly. Charters are theoretically more autonomous than traditional public schools while still accountable to regulators, as their survival depends on market popularity as well as support from the charter board and authorizer.

However, regulatory regimes vary widely across states. Arizona, for example, tends to receive praise from champions of school choice because it mostly defers to parental preferences to determine when charters are opened or closed.<sup>16</sup> Maryland, on the other hand, is favored by the National Education Association (NEA) because the sector is highly regulated and not allowed to grow in a way that meaningfully threatens the public school monopoly.<sup>17</sup> Variation in these regulatory approaches allow observation of the degree to which parental rather than regulator control affects how woke schools tend to be.

## Methodological Approach

Our study requires us to measure charter wokeness and regulatory capture. To measure the former, we examined publicly available parent-student handbooks of the 20 largest charter schools in each state by enrollment. We then counted the number of times those handbooks contain words or phrases that indicate adherence to contemporary progressive education orthodoxy. Specifically, the terms we searched for in charter school student handbooks are: (1) diversity, (2) equity, (3) inclusion, (4) justice, (5) restorative, (6) social-emotional learning, (7) gender identity, and (8) culturally affirming. Following are examples of instances in which these search terms were deployed:

- The student handbook of a school in Rhode Island promises to “reduce the stigmatization of and improve the educational integration of transgender and nonconforming students, maintaining the privacy of all students, and fostering cultural competence and professional development for school staff” and “[p]rovide all students with access to restrooms and changing facilities that correspond to their gender identity, including providing an all-gender bathroom option.”<sup>18</sup>
- The student handbook of a school in Alabama states that “Restorative Practices play a key role in establishing common language and strategies that aid in the growth of our students’ social-emotional core

competencies.” Staff will employ “natural and logical” consequences to “redirect” misbehavior. “As part of that, maintaining all students’ dignity rather than shaming or blaming them is central to a restorative approach to discipline.”<sup>19</sup>

- The student handbook of an Illinois school pledges that “[i]f behavior infractions that threaten student and staff safety or severely disrupt the learning environment occur, the school’s response aims to 1) minimize the impact of the incident, 2) repair harm, and 3) address the underlying needs behind student behaviors.... In accordance with a commitment to equity, all intervening responses must protect each student’s right to instructional time and be applied without bias.” The school “is committed to applying school remediation policies and practices in a fair and equitable manner so as not to disproportionately impact students and families who have been historically underserved in schools based on race, ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc.”<sup>20</sup>

All these practices may sound reasonable. No one wants to stigmatize or shame students. But the use of these eight terms is often used as a signal for the commitment to a woke ideological agenda. In practice, “restorative” discipline often means no discipline at all rather than an effective way of “maintaining all students’ dignity.”<sup>21</sup>

We did not count cases in which the key terms are used in a way that is definitionally different from the usage of interest. As an example, we counted “inclusive” when it refers to “including everyone” but not when it refers to “covering or intended to cover all items, costs, or services.”<sup>22</sup> Even when the search terms are definitionally consistent with our usage of interest they are occasionally deployed in ways that do not signal wokeness. However, this phenomenon is no more apparent in one state than another, so while it may introduce measurement error, it does not threaten to bias or otherwise invalidate our estimates.

We used the most recent state charter law scores published by the CER to score state charter sectors according to their degree of autonomy to be responsive to parents and have freedom from burdensome regulators.<sup>23</sup> Scores range from 53 (Arizona) to 6 (Iowa). The average score is 31.6, with higher scores reflecting greater freedom to operate with less regulatory control.

To lower the likelihood that our estimates are skewed by a single outlier we omitted states that permit the operation of charter schools but for which we could locate fewer than five parent-student handbooks, thereby

eliminating some states with new charter sectors (Mississippi and West Virginia) or highly constrained charter sectors (Iowa, Wyoming, and Virginia). Moreover, to ensure that the parent-student handbooks we located are in fact representative of the largest charters in the state, we removed the three states for which we could locate fewer than half of the parent-student handbooks of the largest 20 charter schools (Alaska, New Jersey, and Oregon). We also limited our analysis to one charter per network per state, as schools within the same network typically have similar or even identical handbooks. Finally, we limited our analysis to one virtual charter school per state. Virtual charters tend to comprise a disproportionate number of the largest charters in the state because they do not face the same practical enrollment constraints as brick-and-mortar schools. However, students in virtual schools comprise only about 5 percent of students enrolled in charter schools, so our approach ensures that we captured data from virtual charters in a way that accurately reflects their market penetration. Overall, we reviewed and recorded the frequency of woke terms in 661 student handbooks from 35 states plus Washington, DC.

## Results

We observed great variability in the degree to which parent-student handbooks use woke terminology. In Arizona and Florida, the set of terms for which we searched are collectively featured only 2.5 and 2.8 times per handbook, respectively. In Illinois and Washington State, these eight terms appear an average of 49.9 and 39.0 times per handbook, respectively. With each state assigned equal weighting, the average number of times these eight terms were mentioned is 14.1.

Statistical analysis lends credence to our hypothesis about a link between wokeness and regulatory capture.

We used difference-of-means tests to assess how frequently our search terms appeared in states where the CER score falls below the average score of 31.6 compared to states where the score lands above that number. In each of the eight cases, the term is used more frequently in states with more stringent regulation.

Each term compared individually is less reliable as an indication of wokeness than the combination of all eight terms. When we sum the frequency with which all eight terms are mentioned in each handbook and then take an average of that composite score for all handbooks in each state, there is a dramatic difference between states. In states with an above average CER score—meaning that charters are more accountable to parents—these

TABLE 1

## Frequency of Woke Terms in Charter School Student Handbooks

Term	Average (All States in Analysis)	Above Average CER Score States	Below Average CER Score States
Diversity**	1.9	1.5	2.7
Equity**	1.5	1.0	2.6
Inclusion**	1.0	0.8	1.6
Justice*	0.9	0.7	1.3
Restorative**	3.3	2.5	5.0
Social-emotional learning**	2.6	2.1	3.7
Culturally affirming	0.9	0.7	1.3
Gender identity	2.1	1.8	3.0
Combined***	14.1	11.0	21.2

\*p<0.1 \*\*p<0.05 \*\*\*p<0.01

SOURCE: Authors' calculations. For more information, see the methodology.

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eight woke terms are only mentioned 11.0 times, on average, in charter school parent-student handbooks. But in states with below average CER scores—meaning that charters are more accountable to regulators than to parents—these eight woke terms are almost twice as common in parent-student handbooks. The difference in the composite score (11.0 vs. 21.2) is statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level.

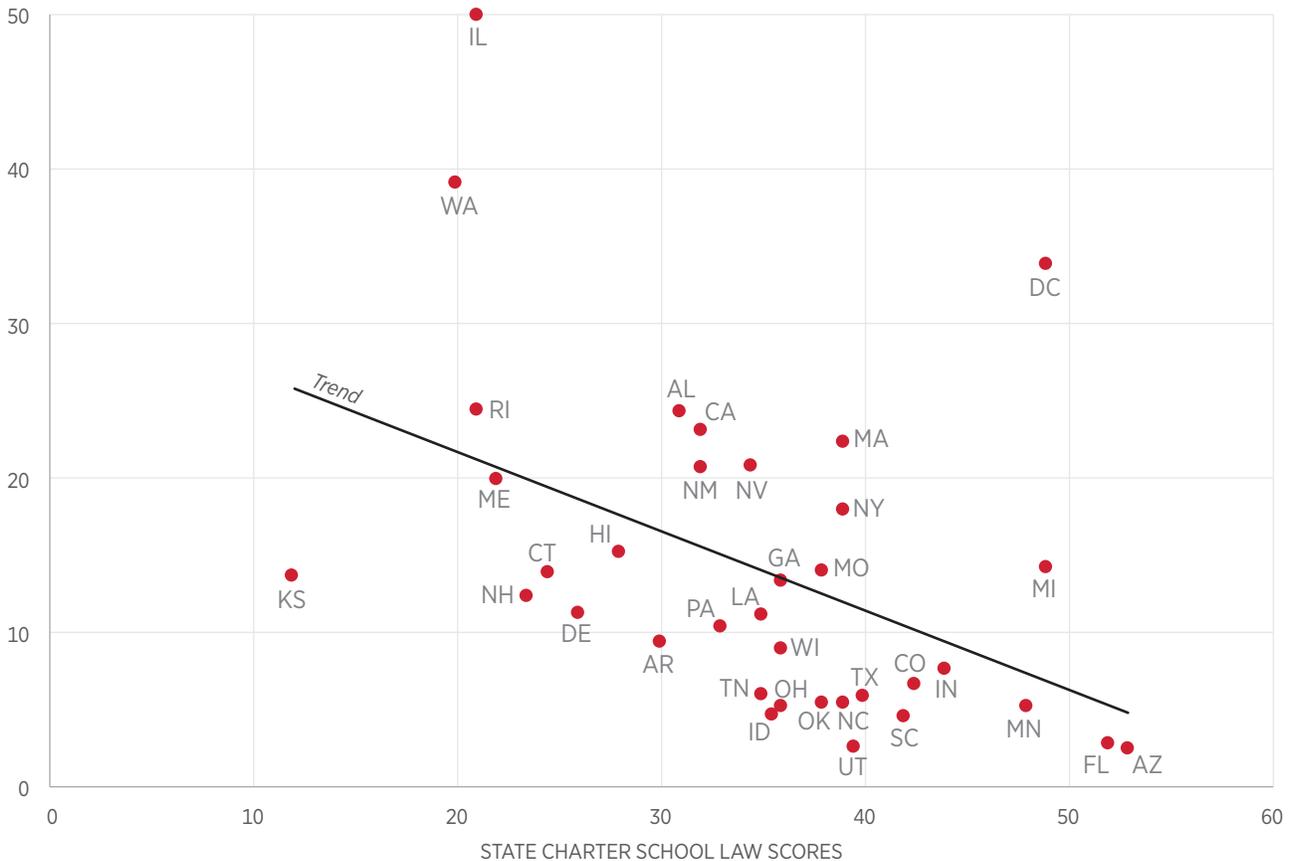
Notably, it could be the case that more conservative states have less regulated charter markets since those states are more inclined to believe in the benefits of educational freedom. To test whether the correlation we observed is spurious—caused by state political ideology rather than by the regulatory context—we used multiple regression analysis that controls for the share of state votes that Donald Trump received in the 2020 election as a proxy for state political ideology. When we used this approach, none of the observed relationships between wokeness and CER score changed in direction or significance. The regulation of charter schools is related to their wokeness independent of state political ideology.

The fact that Arizona and Florida register the lowest wokeness scores despite their status as political battlegrounds illustrates how the absence of wokeness is not merely the result of a state's partisanship but is also driven by each state's regulatory regime that governs charter schools.

CHART 1

## Wokeness and Charter School Regulation

WOKE SCORE



**SOURCES:** Authors' calculations and Center for Education Reform, "National Charter School Law Rankings & Scorecard—2022," <https://edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/ceer-charterlaws-scorecard-2022.pdf/> (accessed October 31, 2022). For more information, see the methodology.

## Discussion

Our analysis lends credence to the theory that more stringently regulated charter markets are more woke than those that adhere to market principles and are more accountable to parents. If charters offer any indication, the expansion of gender ideology, race essentialism, and other woke projects into K–12 education is occurring against the wishes of most parents, not at their behest. When parents have more power over their schools by having

less regulated school choices, the average wokeness of schools is significantly reduced.

Our findings suggest that charter authorizers and government bureaucrats hold, on average, more woke proclivities than the general population. Woke schools flourish in places where bureaucratic gatekeeping powers are particularly pronounced and uncontested (that is, states with a single charter authorizer or states that preclude charter applicants from applying to more than one authorizer). Parents then select these schools not because they view them as optimal or aligned with their values, but because they are choosing the lesser of two evils among a constrained set of options. Heavy regulation of charter schools creates a “woke duopoly” in which parents have choices, but only among the woke options that regulators make available to them.

Our findings should spur reform in conservative states with highly regulated charter markets. Alabama, for example, registers a higher wokeism score than does California or Massachusetts. Indiana has expanded access to private school choice, yet its highly regulated and relatively woke charter sector are at odds with the political culture of the state. By contrast, Arizona embodies the gold standard for school choice, in general, and, per CER rankings, for charter schools, in particular. Policymakers eager to make changes would be wise to look toward the Grand Canyon State as a model both for how to expand school choice and how to keep those choices free from overly burdensome regulation.

Critically, policymakers should understand that whatever trade-offs they imagine between the public interest and family freedom are precisely that: imagined. Deference to the high-regulatory model of chartering has not resulted in greater gains on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores, the so-called nation’s report card. On the contrary, Arizona outpaces the nation on student growth in achievement. Plus, a nascent but important literature finds large disconnects between test score gains in school choice programs and the type of later-in-life outcomes for which test scores are supposed to proxy.<sup>24</sup> Unfettered school choice better serves private and public interests.

In addition to regulation empowering the more woke preferences of regulators over the less woke views of parents, it is possible that regulation invites greater philanthropic influence, which also tends to favor woke practices. Though the education reform movement is often described by unions as right wing, closer inspection reveals that the biggest foundations active in education reform have strongly progressive leanings. This can be seen in the fact that grantees that receive support from the Bill and Melinda

Gates and Walton Family Foundations (the two largest philanthropies in terms of giving within the education reform space) overwhelmingly donate to Democratic candidates<sup>25</sup> and on average hold political views that are to the left of the average Democratic voter.<sup>26</sup> Major philanthropies and their grantees inevitably hold more sway over charter markets in states where the obstacles to receiving and sustaining a charter are high, and they are not shy about projecting influence. Most notably, charter management organizations tend to receive disproportionate philanthropic support compared to standalone charters, and as of five years ago, the gap was widening.<sup>27</sup> Uncoincidentally, highly regulated charter markets tend to privilege charter management organizations over standalone charters when it comes to who receives permission to open a school.<sup>28</sup>

Our findings should also serve as a cautionary tale about how best to regulate newly enacted or expanded private school choice programs. Previous research finds that regulations within such programs made participation less appealing for private schools. Consequently, those that participated tended to be those most eager to fill seats, which parents ostensibly judged as lower quality.<sup>29</sup> Regulatory capture could similarly dissuade higher-quality providers from participating and might disproportionately dissuade participation from religious or classical schools that sense that participation might compel them to compromise their principles and those coveted by parents. A recent survey distributed to Protestant schools found that nearly four in five schools would decline participation in a voucher program if it mandated open enrollment.<sup>30</sup>

Lessons should also be drawn when it comes to funding school choice programs. Charters are generally funded by states at a lower level than traditional public schools, forcing charters to rely more on external financial support. While some notable education reform leaders applaud the role that major philanthropic support plays in the charter movement,<sup>31</sup> it enables philanthropies to project influence, and diminishes the role of parents in determining the character and fate of schools of choice. Philanthropies will find it impossible to project the same influence in a free market where funding fully follows the child to the school of his or her parents' choice.

Our findings indicate that conservative choice skeptics are right to raise alarm about the prospect of regulatory capture over expanded school choice programs. However, they are mistaken in fearing that empowering parents will fail to reduce wokeism. When regulations are held in check, as many states have managed to do with their charter sectors, there is a significant reduction in how woke schools tend to be. Conservatives would do well to be vigilant of capture rather than resigning themselves to defeat. Parental

empowerment represents a viable path toward fighting back against woke encroachment in K–12 schools. Controlling wokeness can be achieved by ensuring that schools are more accountable to parents than to regulators.

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