

Texas Families Deserve School Choice

THE ISSUE

Although the Texas economy is racing ahead at full speed, state K–12 education has stalled. One major obstacle has been the claim by opponents of school choice in Texas that giving families more education options via education choice policies would harm or even destroy rural district schools. These concerns, even if understandable, are not based on evidence. By looking at Arizona’s school choice program, we can see that both rural students and teachers have a great deal to gain from education choice.

TEXAS SCHOOLS IN DECLINE

Even before COVID, the Texas rural education system was in decline, but the post-COVID results have been nothing short of catastrophic.

Between 2007–2022, rural students in Texas saw:

- a 20-point decline in eighth-grade math vs. a 7-point decline nationally
- a 12-point decline in eighth-grade reading vs. a 4-point decline nationally

PUBLIC SUPPORT

Within Texas, there is widespread support for school choice statewide. A Fall 2022 survey by *The Dallas Morning News* and the University of Texas at Tyler found that 60 percent of Texans support school choice policies, including 65 percent of Latino respondents.

Support for school choice policies is particularly strong among rural Republicans

in Texas. In the March 2022 Texas Republican primary, Proposition 9 asked voters whether “Texas parents and guardians should have the right to select schools, whether public or private, for their children, and the funding should follow the student.” The proposition passed 88 percent to 12 percent—with some of the highest levels of support coming from the most rural counties in Texas, such as Culberson (97 percent), McMullen (90 percent), and Terrell (90 percent).

ARIZONA AS A MODEL FOR RURAL SCHOOL CHOICE

Arizona and Texas have many similarities—both are border states with large and growing metropolitan areas as well as vast rural areas. Thus, Arizona can provide a road map for Texas on how to revitalize K–12 education through school choice. The same force that drove the economic “Texas Miracle”—healthy competition—is driving educational entrepreneurship and academic improvement in Arizona. While rural scores in Texas and nationwide fell over the past 15 years, K–12 students in rural Arizona have significantly improved their academic performance.

The pre-COVID National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) figures are even more revealing. From 2007–2019, they showed an astonishing increase for rural fourth- and eighth-grade students in Arizona in math, reading, and science—a combined 43-point increase. Meanwhile, NAEP scores for rural students nationwide were flat and the performance of rural students in Texas declined by a combined 14 points.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <https://report.heritage.org/fs255>

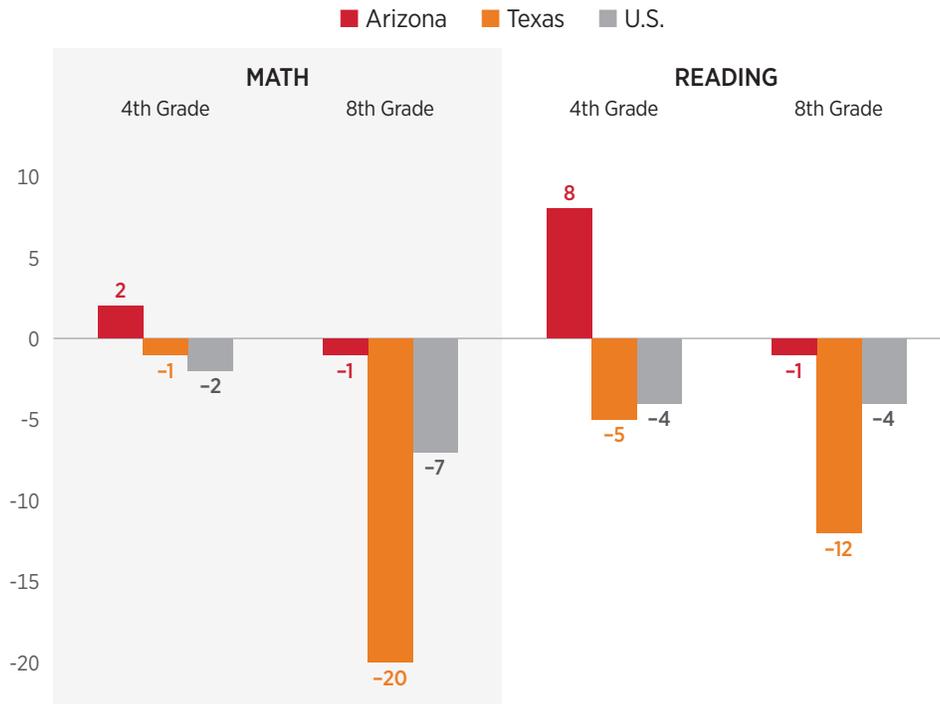
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CHART 1

NAEP Trends for Rural Students, Post-COVID: Arizona, Texas, and the United States

Figures are for 2007–2022.



SOURCE: National Assessment of Educational Progress, “NAEP Data Explorer,” <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ndecore/landing> (accessed August 4, 2023).

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CONCLUSION

Rural Texas students, teachers, and communities deserve an education system that will help improve their lives and their futures. However, the current one-size-fits-all education system does not work in these rural communities, or anywhere else, causing academic performance to stagnate and even decline. As the data from Arizona show us, far

from harming schools in rural areas, education flourished in rural areas under their robust choice environment. Not only did Arizona’s rural schools not crumble, they diversified their offerings, and their academic performance grew stronger over time.