

The Demand and Supply of Private School Choice in Missouri

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Key Points

In this brief, we consider the demand and supply sides of private school choice in Missouri and how the opinions of voters, parents, and private school leaders diverge on the MOScholars Program. We find:

1. Fifty-three percent of voters and 67% of parents support the program.
2. Over half of voters and parents oppose the geographic eligibility restriction that limits participation to particular areas of the state.
3. Four out of 10 voters and five out of 10 parents support requiring participating schools to waive admissions requirements for scholarship students. Nine out of 10 geographically-eligible-intending schools do not intend to make changes to admissions practices.
4. Four out of 10 voters and parents support requiring participating schools to allow scholarship students to opt out of religious activities, while leaders of eligible-intending schools overwhelmingly oppose (86%) such a policy.
5. Support is strongest among voters and parents (73%) for requiring participating schools to administer the state's standardized tests. Eight out of 10 eligible-intending schools are opposed to or undecided about using state tests.



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Introduction

The MOScholars program was signed into law in July 2021 and went into effect for the 2022-23 school year.¹ Through the program, K-12 students can apply scholarships of up to \$6,375 toward private school tuition or other educational expenses, while individuals and corporations that donate to scholarship-granting organizations will receive state tax credits.² One of the main legislative compromises for the bill's passage was a geographic eligibility restriction. Students must live in one of the state's four charter counties or in a city with a population of 30,000 or more to be eligible to receive a scholarship.^a Scholarship recipients must have also attended public school for one semester in the previous year or be starting kindergarten or first grade. After meeting these eligibility standards, preference is given to students with disabilities and students from low-income families before scholarships are offered to students from moderate-income families.

Almost all St. Louis area Catholic and Lutheran schools have partnered with one of the six state-approved scholarship-granting organizations for the 2022-23 school year.³ As of early August, approximately 1,800 students statewide had applied for a scholarship, and \$3,032,522 in individual and corporate donations had been committed to the program, enough to fund 428 scholarships.⁴

With early application numbers suggesting strong parental interest in the MOScholars program, this brief examines the opinions of parents on the program and how their opinions differ from those of voters and private school leaders. We also consider the reasons school leaders intend to participate and key concerns they have about the program. In doing so, we contrast the demand and supply sides of private school choice and highlight considerations for Missouri policymakers seeking to balance competing demands.

MOScholars Program Eligibility

- ***Recipients must live in one of the state's four charter counties or in a city with a population of 30,000 or more.***
- ***Recipients must have attended public school for one semester in the previous year or be starting kindergarten or first grade.***



After meeting these eligibility standards, preference is given to students with disabilities and students from low-income families.

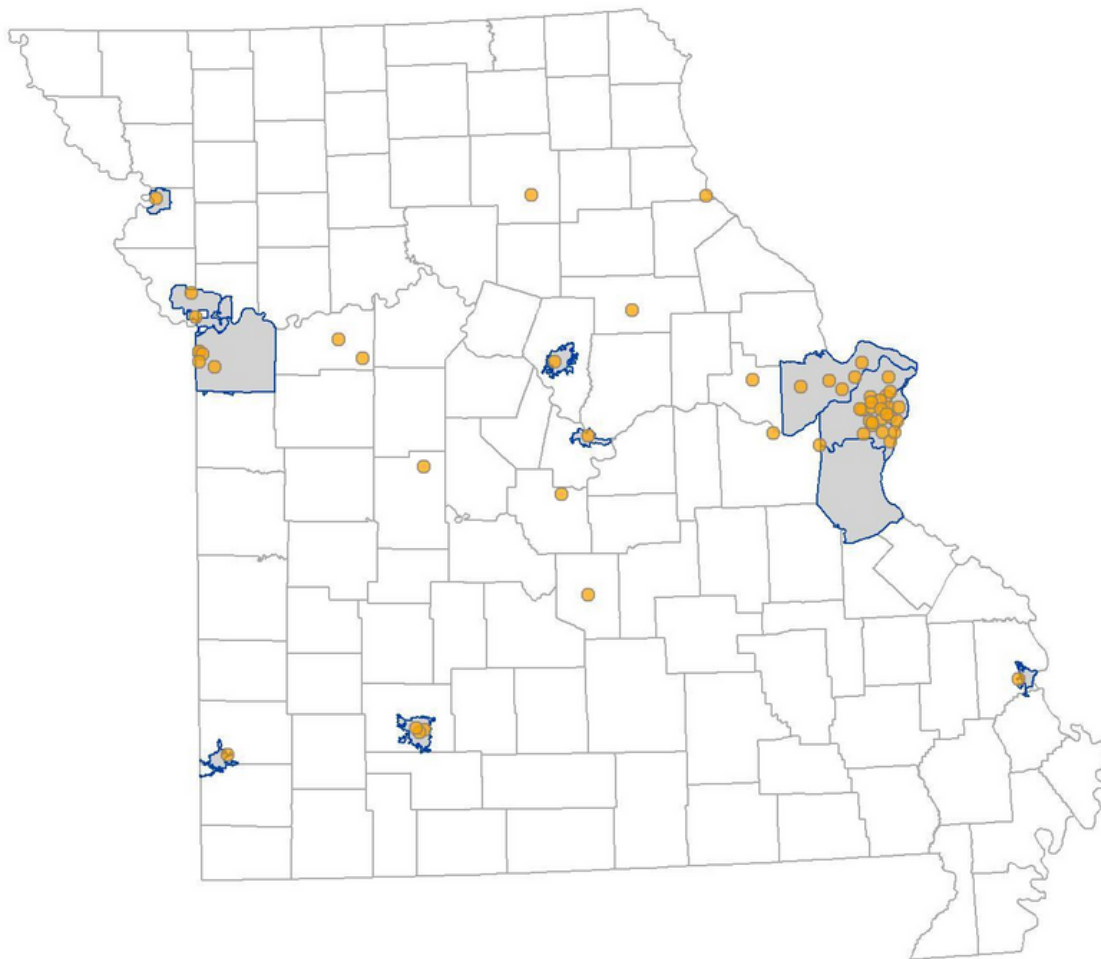
^a The state's four charter counties are St. Louis, St. Charles, and Jefferson counties in the St. Louis metro area and Jackson County in Kansas City.

Polling on MOScholars Program

In 2021, we polled a representative sample of 950 Missouri registered voters and a representative sample of 600 Missouri parents.^b We asked respondents about their support for the scholarship program and hypothetical regulatory mechanisms the state could impose.⁵

In the summer of 2022, we surveyed Missouri's private school leaders about their intent to participate in the 2022-23 school year or in a future school year. We also asked whether school leaders had concerns about the program and how likely they were to make adjustments for scholarship students, such as waiving admissions requirements or allowing students to opt out of religious activities. We received 62 complete responses and matched them with schools in the Private School Universe Survey (PSS) to determine schools' geographic eligibility for the program. Forty-eight of the responding schools are in charter counties or likely-eligible cities, and 14 are located in areas of the state where students are ineligible to participate.^c Figure 1 shows the locations of responding schools and the boundaries of geographically-eligible areas.

Figure 1 : Locations of Responding Schools and Geographically-Eligible Areas



^b SLUPoll is a partnership between Saint Louis University and the professional polling firm YouGov. YouGov uses its own survey panel, to which respondents must opt in. Using self-reported demographic characteristics such as age, race, gender, and education level, the voter sample is weighted to reflect the characteristics of the state's registered voters as reported in the 2018 Current Population Survey. The parent sample is weighted to approximate the characteristics of parents as reported in the 2019 American Community Survey 1-year sample.

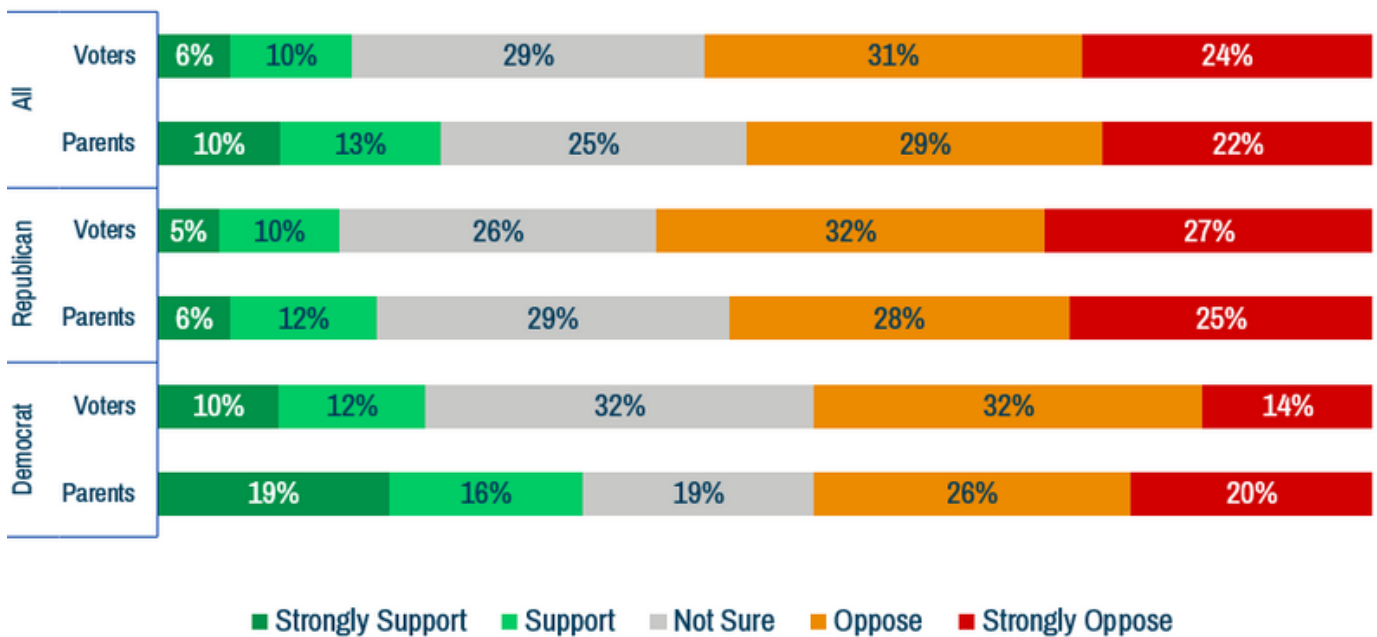
^c We identified likely-eligible cities based on 2020 Decennial Census population counts for census-designated places.

Voter and Parent Support for the MOScholars Program

A majority of voters (53%) and a significant majority of parents (72%) expressed support for the program. Notably, parents expressed higher support than did voters in every subgroup. The highest support came from Republican (74%), non-White (72%), and religious (74%) parents. Slightly less than half of Democrat voters (48%) supported the program, while seven out of 10 Democrat parents expressed support. Over half of voters and parents opposed the geographic eligibility restriction on program participation, with the strongest opposition coming from Republican voters (59%) and parents (53%; Figure 2). We also asked survey respondents about their opinions on four hypothetical regulations, and for all four, support was higher among Democrat voters and parents than among Republican voters and parents.

Parents were more likely to express intent to use a scholarship for tuition if they already had children in private school. In addition, parents with a greater number of children living in their household were more likely than parents with fewer children to express interest in private school scholarships. Parents of children who received free or reduced-price lunch at school or who had a disability were no more likely than other parents to express intent to use a scholarship for private school tuition but did express intent to use one for other educational services.

Figure 2: Voter and Parent Opposition to the Geographic Eligibility Restriction



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Private School Leader Survey Responses

Intent to Participate

Most (43 of 48) school leaders responding from geographically-eligible schools indicated intent to participate in the program, with the majority (72%) intending to participate in the first year. The top reasons schools cited for participation were to help current scholarship-eligible students (83% of schools), provide religious education to more students (79%), and help disadvantaged students (64%). Their top concern was the possibility of future regulations. Though school leaders were not asked to specify what was meant by this, it could be that survey questions about hypothetical regulations prompted this concern. Two out of five respondents from eligible-intending schools lacked confidence the program will still exist in its current form in five years.^d

Leaders of geographically-eligible schools not intending to participate were most concerned that participation would affect their school's independence or character or make it difficult to maintain their religious identity. Some indicated concern that scholarship students would be unlikely to select their school or that the state would require adherence to state learning standards. These school leaders also shared the concern that additional regulations could be added in the future. When asked what would make them more likely to participate, one school leader indicated no government involvement as a requirement, while another would only participate if scholarships were offered through a non-religious foundation.

Responses from geographically-ineligible schools indicated some confusion around program eligibility, as seven of the 14 indicated intent to participate in the program. An additional two ineligible schools specified they would participate if nearby students were eligible.

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Characteristics of Geographically-Eligible Schools

Half of eligible-intending schools responding to the survey serve grades K-8, and 21% were high schools. Eighty-eight percent of eligible-intending schools identified as Catholic (53%) or other religious (35%), while three out of five eligible schools that did not intend to participate had no religious affiliation. School leaders were asked to identify the top three ways their schools are distinct from neighboring public schools. Eligible-intending schools were most likely to select

^d We use "participating school" throughout to refer to any hypothetical school that could participate in the program. We use "eligible-intending" to designate schools that responded to the survey and are 1) in a geographically-eligible area and 2) expressed intent to participate in the program in the 2022-23 school year or in a future school year.

religious affiliation as their primary distinction, while curriculum/theme was the distinction selected most frequently by eligible schools declining to participate.

The average tuition for elementary school students at eligible-intending schools is \$6,155, with middle school tuition averaging \$9,041 and high school tuition averaging \$15,352 annually. The MOScholars program offers scholarships of up to \$6,375, an amount that would cover the average tuition for elementary student recipients while covering only two-thirds of middle school tuition and less than half of high school tuition. Only 19% of eligible-intending schools have no admissions requirements, while 30% require an academic aptitude test, 51% require an interview or audition, 63% require a site visit, and 26% serve a single gender.

Schools were asked about their ability to serve students with disabilities, given that these students receive scholarship preference under program guidelines. Slightly more than one-third (35%) of school leaders at eligible-intending schools indicated their schools only serve students with “mild” disabilities, while 58% admit students with “mild to moderate” disabilities. Only 7% of eligible-intending schools would admit a student with a “severe” disability.

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Comparing Opinions on Hypothetical Program Regulations

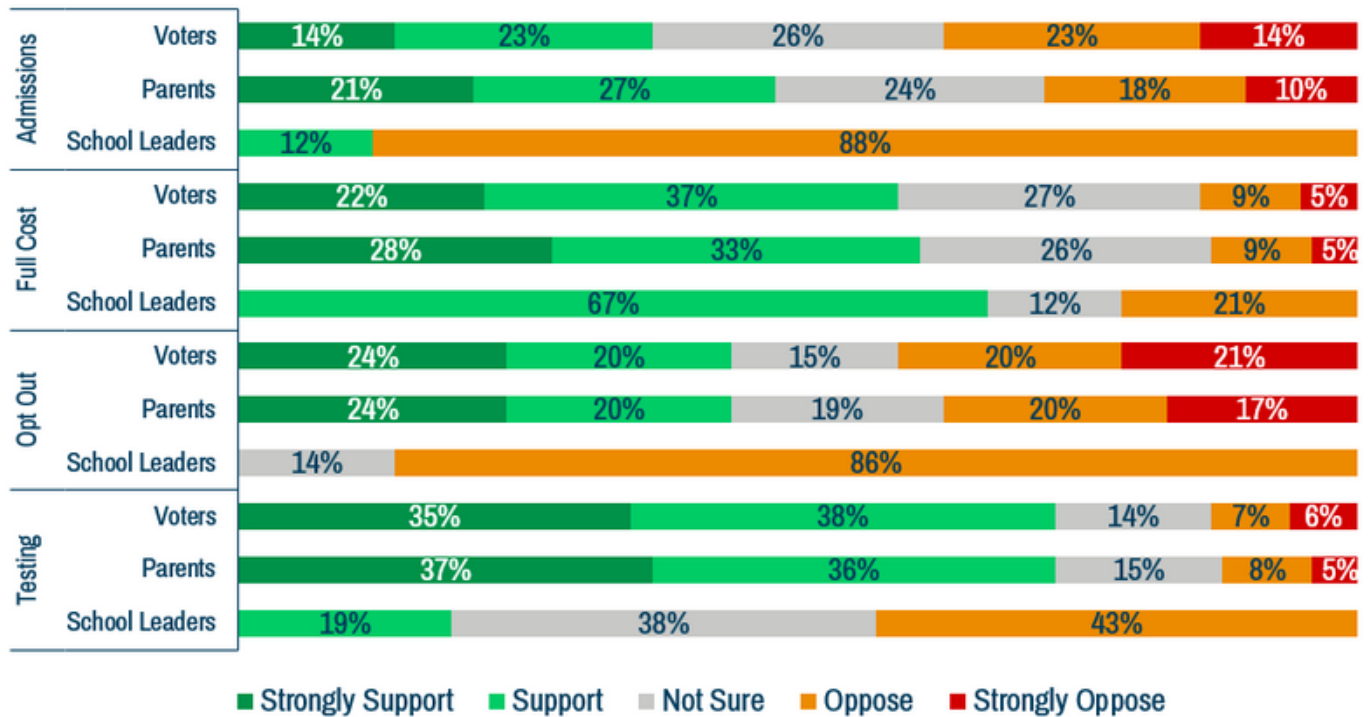
Admissions Requirements. Thirty-seven percent of voters and half of surveyed parents supported requiring participating schools to waive admissions requirements for scholarship students (Figure 2). However, 88% of eligible-intending schools did not intend to waive any admissions requirements. Nine percent expressed willingness to waive the site visit requirement only, but no schools indicated intent to waive requirements such as academic aptitude tests or interviews.

Cost of Tuition. Six out of 10 voters and parents supported requiring participating schools to accept MOScholars scholarships to cover the full cost of tuition. Sixty-seven percent of eligible-intending schools expressed a willingness to do this, including seven schools serving high school students with an average tuition of \$12,329.

Participation in Religious Activities. Four out of 10 voters and parents supported allowing scholarship students to opt out of religious activities at participating schools. Responding schools were strongly opposed to such a policy. Eighty-six percent expressed opposition and no schools indicated intent to institute this practice.

State Standardized Tests. By regulation, participating schools must administer a standardized test to scholarship students and publicly report the results. Support was high among voters and parents for requiring participating schools to administer the state’s standardized tests to satisfy the testing requirement. Two out of 10 eligible-intending schools expressed willingness to do this, while 43% were opposed to using the state’s tests and 38% were not sure.

Figure 3: Voter, Parent, and School Leader Support for Hypothetical Regulations



Conclusion

A slight majority of voters and two-thirds of parents statewide support the existence of the MOScholars program. However, the preferences of voters and parents around program regulations do not align with actual regulations or the preferences of school leaders. There is strong opposition to the geographic eligibility restriction, which was added as a compromise between legislators but is unpopular with voters and parents. School leaders responding to the survey also expressed disappointment that scholarships are not available to the state’s rural students. In other areas there was clear disagreement. School leaders were unwilling to waive admissions requirements or allow scholarship students to opt out of religious activities and were unsure about administering state standardized tests, while voters and parents showed more support for than opposition to such policies. Moving forward, Missouri policymakers must continue to balance the demands of voters and taxpayers who are concerned with the operation of the program and school leaders who may not participate if they feel the program is over regulated.

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Questions remain about whether eligible-intending schools are accessible to students applying for MOScholars scholarships. Responding schools have requirements that may pose obstacles to enrollment, such as academic aptitude tests, interviews, and site visits. Half of parents would like to see participating schools waive admissions requirements for scholarship students, but nine out of 10 eligible-intending schools had no intention to change admissions practices.

Priority scholarship access is given to low-income students. However, average tuition for middle and high school students at eligible-intending schools is far above the maximum scholarship award of \$6,375, making it unlikely that low-income students could access these schools without additional financial assistance. Two out of three eligible-intending schools indicated some willingness to accept the scholarship amount to cover the full cost of tuition, but it will be important to assess whether the highest-need students gain access to private schools through this program. Finally, while students with disabilities have priority access to scholarships, not all private schools are positioned to serve the needs of these students. We encourage the state to evaluate the operation of the MOScholars program to determine the extent to which the program is meeting outlined goals and thereby serving the students it was intended to serve.

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