



Insight

Comparing Trump and Biden's K-12 Education Plans

TOM LEE | SEPTEMBER 17, 2020

Executive Summary

- President Donald Trump and Democratic nominee and former Vice President Joe Biden have markedly different views on the appropriate role of the federal government in K-12 education.
- President Trump has sought to decrease the role and spending of the federal government in K-12 education.
- Former Vice President Biden seeks to dramatically increase federal influence and spending in K-12 education.

Introduction

The K-12 education plans from President Donald Trump and Democratic presidential nominee and former Vice President Joe Biden are sharply divergent and reflect each party's broader approach to policy. President Trump sees education as an issue in which the federal government should play a limited role, allowing state and local education agencies to have more autonomy. In contrast, Democratic nominee Biden believes the federal government should play a more hands-on role in K-12 education. This analysis examines and compares key aspects of the candidates' K-12 education proposals.

The Role and Spending of the Federal Government in K-12

President Donald Trump

During his first term in office, President Trump has sought to decrease federal spending on K-12 education. He proposed decreasing the Department of Education's funding by 13.5 percent in fiscal year (FY) 2018, 5 percent in FY 2019, and 10 percent in FY 2020. [1] [2] [3] He has continued this trend with his FY 2021 budget, requesting \$66.6 billion for the Department of Education, a 7.8 percent or \$5.6 billion decrease from FY 2020. [4]

President Trump's FY 2021 budget would also reduce the federal government's influence on state and local education agency funding. The Department of Education currently administers 29 different federal formula and competitive grant programs. Each of these grant programs uses its own specific formulas and criteria to distribute federal funds to states. In other words, states are eligible to receive 29 different grants and each grant comes with specific guidelines on how to use those funds. Trump's FY 2021 budget proposes to merge these 29 formula and competitive grant programs into a single block grant program called the Elementary and Secondary Education for the Disadvantaged Block Grant. Block grants usually entail Congress taking an existing grant and its funding, reducing federal oversight, and then turning the funds over to states. Under this proposal, instead of a state receiving 29 different federal grants, it would receive one lump sum and then have the autonomy to determine how it will distribute those funds to local education agencies.

Democratic Nominee Joe Biden

Former Vice President Biden's education plan calls for more federal intervention and spending in public K-12 school systems, which are traditionally funded and administered at the state and local level. Biden specifically plans to triple funding for Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which is the largest federal education grant program. Through Title I, the federal government provides extra funding to states for local education agencies in high-poverty and low-income areas. In FY 2020, Title I received \$16.3 billion in funding; under Biden, that figure could grow to about \$48 billion. [5], [6] Under this proposal, the federal government would have much more influence on state and local education finances simply because the portion of state and local funds received from the federal government would greatly increase. The stated end-goal of this proposal is to increase teacher pay and classroom expenditures (commonly defined as instruction expenditures), especially in low-income and high-poverty districts, and thereby improve student performance. [7]

Prior research from the American Action Forum has found that Title I funds received by local education agencies are commonly spent on other things besides teacher pay and classroom expenditures, such as counseling and after-school programs. Thus, absent other structural reforms, tripling Title I funding may not achieve Biden's stated aims.

School Choice

President Donald Trump

During his first term in office, President Trump has been a staunch supporter of school choice. The Federal Charter School Program, which provides federal funds for states and local education agencies to spend on charter schools, has seen its funding increase over \$100 million since Trump took office. [8] But even with this increased support for charter schools, Trump's vision of school choice has moved toward providing vouchers for families to pay for private school tuition. In 2019, he proposed the Education Freedom Scholarships program, which would create a \$5 billion annual federal tax credit for families and individuals that donate to scholarship-granting organizations. Recipients could then use the federal tax credit to pay for private school tuition. Trump also called on Congress during his 2020 State of the Union to pass the accompanying legislation for the program.

Supporters of charter schools were alarmed by Trump's FY 2021 budget proposal, however, because one of the 29 programs it proposed including the Federal Charter School program in a block grant. [9] While the administration included language in its budget encouraging states to reserve block grant funds for charter schools, this president's proposal would cease dedicated federal funding for charter schools.

Democratic Nominee Joe Biden

Whereas President Trump equates school choice with private school vouchers, Biden supports the more traditional public charter school. He vehemently opposes federal funding for private school vouchers and for-profit charter schools. His campaign has not provided more specific details on school choice. This current position on school choice is delicate, however. Those on the far left generally oppose all forms of school choice. Those in the center left generally support public charter schools, especially in urban areas where they are the most popular. The Biden campaign will need to balance these competing forces.

Career and Technical Education

President Donald Trump

Throughout his first term in office, President Trump has sought to increase federal support for career and technical education in K-12. In 2018, he signed into law the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for

the 21st Century Act, which is a reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act (Perkins).[10] This legislation allows states to spend more federal funds on skills and trades courses throughout K-12. Perkins receives about \$1.2 billion per year in federal funding.[11] His FY 2021 budget would increase federal spending on Perkins by about \$900 million.[12]

Democratic Nominee Joe Biden

Former Vice President Biden has also indicated his support for increased federal spending on career and technical education. His plan specifically mentions that he would invest federal funds into vocational training and create partnerships between high schools, community colleges, and businesses.[13] He also wants to allow Pell Grants for dual enrollment programs; in other words, high school students could use Pell Grants to enroll in community college courses while still attending high school. His plan does not provide more details.

Conclusion

While there are some similarities between President Trump and Democratic presidential candidate Biden on K-12 education policy, there is a clear division on how much influence each believes the federal government should have. Both candidates support school choice to varying degrees as well as increasing career and technical education in K-12, but the dissimilarities are more striking. President Trump has continually proposed decreasing the role and spending of the federal government in K-12 education, and that trend would likely continue in a second term. In contrast, Democratic nominee Biden would dramatically increase federal influence and spending in K-12 education if he were elected.

[1] <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/budget.pdf>

[2] <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/budget-fy2019.pdf>

[3] <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/budget-fy2020.pdf>

[4] https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/budget_fy21.pdf

[5] <https://joebiden.com/education/#>

[6] <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/02/trump-see-29-education-programs-block-grant.html>

[7] Ibid

[8] <https://edsource.org/2020/trump-revives-calls-for-support-for-school-choice-agenda-despite-certain-rejection-in-congress/623382>

[9] Ibid

[10] <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/07/31/donald-trump-signs-career-technical-education-bill.html>

[11] <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2353>

[12] Ibid

[13] Ibid