Insight

The Confirmation of School Choice

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President-elect Trump's campaign promise[i] to champion school choice options for disadvantaged students appears to be reflected by his selection of Betsy DeVos as Education Secretary, who has long supported these initiatives. During DeVos' upcoming Senate confirmation hearing, the merits of school choice (in general) and Trump's campaign proposal (specifically) are likely to be scrutinized.

The Trump education proposal can be summarized in two parts. One, create a $20-billion-dollar block grant to entice states to adopt school choice programs; and two, use the bully pulpit of the executive office to pressure states that are not motivated by federal funds into implementing school choice programs.[ii] The proposal discusses a new federal block-grant, which will require a detailed map for traversing the path towards authorizing, funding, and implementing any such historic school choice program.

Throughout the hearing, onlookers will hear plenty of opposition to school choice with allegations that choice programs shift funding away from public school, or that government incentives to attend private religious schools violate the separation of church and state. Others will assert that the positive effects of school competition on student achievement are overstated by proponents.

What follows is a brief review of existing school choice initiatives and some facts about their impact.

WHAT SCHOOL CHOICE IS

Over the last two decades, school choice options available for parents and students have expanded beyond the use of public funds for private schools. Today, magnet schools, homeschools, internet delivered schools, and charter schools represent the modern school choice movement's non-traditional school options – most of which remain in the public sector. Still, there remains significant interest in and growth of financial assistance programs that provide parents with financial support so that they may seek educational options outside of the public school system.

Examples of Financial Assistance Programs for School Choice include:

Education Saving Accounts (ESA): 5 States (AZ, FL, MS, NV, TN) offer options to create personal accounts that store a child's state education dollars. These funds can be accessed by the parents for use in a variety of educational options, including tuition and fees, textbooks, and tutoring.

Individual Tax Credits/Deductions: **8 States** (AL, IA, IL, IN, LA, MN, SC, WI) offer options for parents to receive state income tax relief for approved educational expenses, which can include private school tuition, books, supplies, computers, tutors and transportation.

Tax Credit Scholarships: **17 States** offer options for state tax credits to businesses and individuals that donate

money to scholarship funds. Such funds are used to establish scholarships that help children attend the private schools of choice.

Voucher Programs: 16 States offer options for programs to give parents the freedom to choose a private school for their children, using all or part of the public funding set aside for their children's education. Under such a program, funds typically expended by a school district would be allocated to a participating family in the form of a voucher to pay partial or full tuition for their child's private school, including both religious and non-religious options.

5 FACTS TO KNOW

- In a national survey, researchers found that: 1) State legislators are twice as likely to say they supported ESAs, compared with opposing such a public policy (61% vs. 30%, respectively). 2) State legislators say they support school vouchers (52% favor vs. 40% oppose), and they are three times more likely to support public charter schools than to oppose them (67% vs. 22%, respectively).[iii]
- 65% of the public say they favor tax credits for donations to foundations that help low-income students attend private schools.[iv]
- In recent years, 14 evaluations using random assignment (the highest methodological standard) have found that various school choice programs improve student achievement.[v]
- A study by the U.S. Department of Education found that 91 percent of D.C.'s Opportunity Scholarship program's students graduated high school. This was thirty percent higher than the average graduation rate of D.C. Public Schools.[vi]
- A study by the Brookings Institution and Harvard University shows African American participants in a private school choice program were 24 percent more likely to enroll in college as a result of receiving a voucher. The study also shows that African American enrollment rates in selective colleges more than doubled among voucher students, and the rate of enrollment in full-time colleges increased by 31 percent. [vii]

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[I] TRUMP, DONALD J. TRUMP OUTLINES BOLD NEW PLAN FOR SCHOOL CHOICE. CLEVELAND ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES ACADEMY, CLEVELAND. 08 SEPT. 2016. SPEECH.

[II] HTTPS://WWW.AMERICANACTIONFORUM.ORG/INSIGHT/TRUMPS-PLAN-BECOME-COMMANDER-CHIEF-SCHOOL-CHOICE-MOVEMENT-LACK-DETAIL-DISCOURAGE-SCHOOL-CHOICE-ADVOCATES/

[III] HTTPS://WWW.EDCHOICE.ORG/RESEARCH/SURVEYING-STATE-LEGISLATORS/

[IV] HTTP://EDUCATIONNEXT.ORG/TEN-YEAR-TRENDS-IN-PUBLIC-OPINION-FROM-EDNEXT-POLL-2016-SURVEY/

[V] HTTPS://WWW.EDCHOICE.ORG/RESEARCH/WIN-WIN-SOLUTION/

[VI] HTTPS://IES.ED.GOV/NCEE/PUBS/20104018/PDF/20104018.PDF

[VII] HTTPS://WWW.BROOKINGS.EDU/RESEARCH/THE-EFFECTS-OF-SCHOOL-VOUCHERS-ON-COLLEGE-ENROLLMENT-EXPERIMENTAL-EVIDENCE-FROM-NEW-YORK-CITY/