

Trump's Plan to Become Commander-in-Chief of the School Choice Movement: Why the Lack of Detail Should Discourage School Choice Advocates

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(Photo by Mark Wilson/Getty Images)

In a speech given at an inner-city Cleveland charter school on September 8, 2016, Donald J. Trump finally introduced what his aides called a detailed education policy proposal. The theme of the proposal was revealed early in the address with a statement that, in the end, may be the only lasting contribution his campaign will make to education policy.

“There is no failed policy more in need of urgent change than our government-run education monopoly... [which] is why I am proposing a plan to provide school choice to every disadvantaged student in America.”ⁱ

It's an encouraging statement for school choice advocates, but the plan offered few details of how he would actually accomplish the goal of providing viable options for disadvantaged students stuck in struggling schools.

Trump's School Choice Proposal

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 browbeat states that are not motivated by federal funds into implementing school choice programs.



First, the plan calls for establishing the block grant in his first budget by setting aside \$20 billion of existing federal funds that will have been reprioritized. Where exactly those funds are taken from is not disclosed. The money will then be offered to the states, with priority given to those that have existing school choice programs. Once awarded, states will have “the option to allow these funds to follow the student to the public or private school they attend.”ⁱⁱ An interesting option considering States’ proclivity to use unrestricted federal funds (i.e. block grants) in ways that sure-up funding for existing initiatives rather than providing new private options for students.

Next, the plan describes how the Trump Administration will take to the bully pulpit and “call upon the American people to elect officials at the city, state and federal level who support school choice”ⁱⁱⁱ, to ensure that states use the money to grow programs that provide students with options.

That’s it.

Trump’s most detailed education policy proposal to-date relies solely on market based competition to solve the problems within the K-12 education system. Unfortunately, as those that have been on the frontline battles for school choice can attest – building federal support for school choice is not that easy. Moreover, an influx of federal funding for choice programs alone is no guarantee that all disadvantaged students will be served, or that the supply of school choice options can meet newly created demand.

These, of course, are not reasons to oppose federal support for school choice. The positive effects of competition in public education has been demonstrated by results such as 100 percent graduation rates reported by a number of successful charter schools, as well as increased college admission rates and soaring parental satisfaction survey results found in existing state or city run scholarship programs. Successful findings such as these are no doubt why Trump has hitched his wagon to school choice, but if the campaign wants to win the debate, it is imperative for his policy proposal to provide a level of detail that demonstrates how the challenges of implementation have been thought through. Disappointingly, that is where the proposal proves to be woefully inadequate.

Federal Funding Influencing Policy

A newly created, federally funded, school choice program would certainly go a long way in providing options to students. Reallocating \$20 billion from other education programs however is a herculean task that will require the consent of Congress to accomplish. If it were as simple as including the priority in the president’s budget proposal, then surely such a program would have been created during a Reagan or either Bush Administrations. The only accomplishment at the federal level similar to what the Trump campaign is proposing, since 1955 when Milton Friedman gave rise to the school choice movement, has been the authorization of a \$20 million D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program (DCOSP). This program serves 1700 students in Washington, D.C., and over the past eight years, has had to fight tooth and nail to receive funding. Taking into consideration the authorization battles of DCOSP, the likelihood of a Trump Administration establishing a newly created, 50 state, school choice program using funds from other programs that will almost certainly be protected by one coalition or another, is difficult to envision.



Furthermore, set aside for a moment the lack of an appropriations strategy in the plan and consider the manner in which the Trump Administration proposes to distribute the new funding for states. The plan calls for creating a grant which will give priorities to states that have or will adopt policies that are favored by his administration. This is a play we have seen before, and one that the presidential contender himself rails against when he bemoans the Common Core standards initiative. Arguably, one of the Obama Administration's most notorious accomplishments has been the use of the \$4.3 billion Race to the Top grant to coerce states into adopting the Common Core standards and the affiliated assessments. So how exactly is prioritizing funding for states that adopt Trump's policies any different? It's not, and therein lies another problem of offering half-baked policy proposals.

The disadvantage here for Mr. Trump is the inability to recognize the hypocrisy of the proposal, which can be easily exploited by opponents of school choice in their efforts to derail his initiative. Certainly it is fair game to attack policies that one doesn't agree with, but it is hypocritical to cry foul on the implementation of such policies (the basis of your argument being federal intrusion) while at the same time putting forth a proposal that uses the very same "stick and carrot" approach to policymaking. The fact is, since the establishment of the federal income tax, federal dollars have been used to influence state policies (land-grant universities, seatbelt laws, minimum age for alcohol consumption, to name a few notable examples) and that's not likely to change. Surely a prudent step for Trump, in an effort to circumvent the objections of critics, would be to acknowledge his double standard and include a few words of justification in his proposal.

Targeting All the Kids in Need of Education Options

In his speech Trump highlights "11 million school age kids living in poverty"^{iv} as the beneficiaries of his education plan. A justifiable number of students for targeting a \$20 billion federal program, but sadly one that falls short on accounting for all those in need. The National Center for Education Statistics reports the number of public school students eligible for the Free and Reduced Priced Lunch Program (a common metric used to measure socioeconomically disadvantaged students) is closer to 24 million.^v

So how has his proposal left out 13 million students faced with economic challenges?

The absence of detail in the plan forces analysis, such as this one, to look beyond the plan itself and into statements on record to find answers. One justification for the New York City native's narrow scope could be explained by the inner-city district examples he uses in his address to the Cleveland school.

"I want every single inner city child in America who is today trapped in a failing school to have the freedom – the civil right – to attend the school of their choice."

"Our largest cities spend some of the largest amounts of money on public schools."

"New York City spends \$20,226 dollars per pupil.

"Baltimore spends \$15,287 dollars per student.

"Chicago spends \$11,976 dollars per student,



“...Los Angeles it is \$10,602.”

“Just imagine if each student in these school systems was given a scholarship for this amount of money – allowing them and their family to choose the public or private school of their choice.”^{vi}

Certainly these quotes are taken out of context, but the repetitive reference to inner-city school districts, coupled with the complete lack of acknowledgement of the one-third of all public schools operating in rural areas, could explain why his proposal targets a lower number of students.

The fact is, the percentage of students in rural areas who are living in poverty (19 percent) is only marginally smaller than students in cities who are living in poverty (25 percent).^{vii} Trump’s understanding of the demographics and scope of the problems within our education system, not unlike many progressive policies today, focuses solely on the troubles of the inner city, while turning a blind eye to the crumbling schools and systems in rural Appalachia, the rust-belt, and the farming communities of America’s heartland.

When Supply Fails to Meet Demand

“Just imagine if each student in these school systems was given a scholarship for this amount of money – allowing them and their family to choose the public or private school of their choice.”^{viii}

Trump’s highly anticipated education policy speech tantalizes constituents with the typical promise of the school choice movement. A promise that should be the goal of every school choice supporter, but here again, he leaves out the specifics of how we achieve the dream. Any serious proposal to establish a federally funded, market based, educational choice program has to include specifics addressing supply-side concerns. While an influx of new money will prime the market, the funds themselves will not effectively remove the barriers-to-entry that will allow schools to access the resources need to shift the supply curve.

Asked bluntly, if we give every eligible child that \$10k scholarship, where will they take it?

Researchers have suggested that only a little more than 1.1 million seats are currently available in the private education sector. A 2015 report from AEI examining existing choice program showed “that only 60 percent of private schools in Florida accept students using tax-credit scholarships and only 50 percent of Indiana schools and 33 percent of Louisiana schools accept voucher students.”^{ix} According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, the waiting lists to enroll in the nation’s charter schools has topped one million students.^x Meanwhile, NCES data shows a decreasing number of magnet schools since their peak in 2008.^{xi} These are sobering statics that only scratch the surface of current supply failing to meet penned-up demand.

Regulatory Burdens Stymie Growth



The regulatory burdens on public education have accumulated immensely over the years (the past 8 especially) and it is these burdens that ultimately stifle the growth of educational options. In order to empower families by “creating a massive education market that is competitive and produces better outcomes”^{xii} it will be imperative to establish rules and regulations that attract rather than discourage private sector participation. Most often, the success of a private school is attributed to their autonomy which allows it to establish its own model for academic success. Usurping that autonomy, in the name of accountability for the public dollar, by forcing the school to adhere to federal regulations will undoubtedly constrict supply. As one AEI Fellow found when studying school choice marketplaces, “school leaders [have] expressed fears of increased regulations, disliked the amount of paperwork necessary to participate, and [are] worried about the instability of [such] programs.”^{xiii}

In order to maximize participation in the program, school leaders and operators will need to feel comfortable that regulations accompanying the federal funding will not:

- diminish the school’s autonomy;
- prohibit selective admission policies that ensure the success of the school’s model;
- require duplicative and unnecessary student assessments;
- increase the work-load of administrative staff with superfluous paperwork requirements; and
- place additional strains on the operating budgets due to difficult or inconsistent per-pupil reimbursements.

Mr. Trump’s proposal fails to acknowledge the effects regulatory policy and lacks insight as to how his administration can sweep clean the rules that serve as a barrier to entry, so that private sector (both non-profit and for-profit) can establish inventory necessary to meet the demand of the consumer.

Conclusion

Mr. Trump’s proposal to champion school choice options for the nation’s millions of disadvantaged students is commendable. School choice would benefit immensely from an unapologetic president that is unwavering in the belief that market based competition can and will improve all of our nation’s schools. Such a president would stand strong in the face of union opposition and disgruntled public school leaders that unabashedly raise concerns for the adults operating our education systems while at the same time ignoring the plight of the generations of youth the systems have failed.

Unfortunately, the school choice movement will also need a president that is disciplined and well versed in policymaking. Establishing a \$20 billion federal block-grant will require a detailed map for traversing the path towards authorizing, funding, and finally implementing any such historic school choice program.



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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 Trump September 2016
- ⁱⁱⁱ Trump September 2016
- ^{iv} Trump September 2016
- ^v U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," Table 46. [Number and percentage of public school students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, by state: Selected years, 2000-01 through 2010-11](#)
- ^{vi} Trump September 2016
- ^{vii} NCES (CCD) Table 46
- ^{viii} Trump September 2016
- ^{ix} Brian Kisida et al., Views from Private Schools: Attitudes about School Choice Programs in Three States, AEI, January 2015, www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Views-fromPrivate-Schools-7.pdf.
- ^x Kern, Nora et. Al., National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Waiting Lists to Attend Charter Schools Top 1 Million Names. Washington, D.C.: May 2014. Web Accessed September 2016
- ^{xi} U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," Table 108. [Number and enrollment of public elementary and secondary schools, by school level, type, and charter and magnet status: Selected years, 1990-91 through 2010-11](#)
- ^{xii} Trump September 2016
- ^{xiii} McShane, Michael Q., AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE. Balancing The Equation: Supply and Demand in Tomorrow's School Choice Marketplaces. Washington D.C.: April 2015. Web Accessed Sept. 2016.