



Private Education Push Gathers Pace

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A growing number of statehouses are considering measures that would allow school districts, parents and students increasingly to use taxpayer funds to explore alternatives to traditional state-backed public education.

The flurry of new bills—which range from supporting private-school options to putting education dollars directly into parents’ hands—come amid concerns of increasing federal overreach in schools and a backlash against the widespread implementation of shared learning benchmarks and standardized testing.

It has also gained momentum from elections last November that increased state legislatures’ numbers of Republicans lawmakers—traditionally strong supporters of school choice.

A bill that passed in the Nevada assembly Thursday proposes tax credits for businesses that support private-school scholarships. Meanwhile, a bill to establish so-called education savings accounts, which put state funds into special savings accounts for some parents to pay for certain services directly, passed through both chambers in Mississippi on Thursday. This latest form of education flexibility has caught the eyes of legislators in many states since Arizona and Florida launched programs in recent years.

So far this year, at least 34 states are considering proposals to create or amend programs that offer private education options, up from 29 last year, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. The number of states considering education savings accounts has doubled to 16 since last year.

“It is looking like this year could beat 2011 in the number of states that expand or adopt new educational choice programs,” said Jason Bedrick, who generally champions the changes as a policy analyst with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. Some 13 states enacted school-choice legislation in 2011.

Supporters of such measures say students benefit from more a competitive educational field that can cater better to their specific needs. Critics, however, worry that the policies hamper progress in traditional schools, which can lose funding when students leave their classrooms, and point out uneven academic performances in alternative programs.

The policies got a boost from elections in November, which vaulted Republicans to the largest number of state lawmakers in nearly a century, as well as from recent flash points in education such as Common Core, the set of math and reading standards adopted by more than 40 states and promoted in federal guidelines. As parents' concerns over standardized exams have surfaced, some have opted to pull their children out of the tests.

Nonprofit groups such as the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice and the Foundation for Excellence in Education have also been pushing for options like education savings accounts.

Meanwhile, efforts to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind law in Congress this year have opened a wider discussion about the federal government's role in schools, with lawmakers such as Sen. Lamar Alexander (R., Tenn.), chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, vowing to return power to the states and local schools.

"Definitely the narrative of rising hesitation to new assessments and standards, plus the fear of federal government intrusion, plays in well with these policies," said Josh Cunningham, a senior policy specialist at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

In Minnesota, Sen. David Hann, GOP minority leader of the Senate, introduced a bill this month to provide education savings accounts to parents of special-needs students. Though the remains in the Senate's education committee, he hopes the bill will be a conversation starter in his state.

"We have to have a change in the process of education, one that allows parents and families to have a meaningful voice in the education of their child," he said.

Some downplay the spate of measures, noting that of the dozens of bills focused on new education choices introduced last year, only 13 passed into law in 10 states, according to the Education Commission of the States, a nonprofit that focuses on education research.

Lily Eskelsen García, president of the National Education Association, the largest teachers union in the U.S., describes the state bills collectively as an effort to privatize public education and maintains that as more families try new options in schooling, such as private or charter schools, they are becoming disillusioned with the results.

Public schools in Milwaukee have been in the cross hairs of the fight over educational choice. While acknowledging the district's struggles to improve its low-performing schools, school officials say legislative efforts that direct focus away from traditional public schools undermine their progress.

Vouchers to attend private school, which first began in Wisconsin, drained \$56 million from the district last year, according to school officials. In response, the district increased the local tax levy.

April Willis, a 34-year-old mother and certified nursing assistant, said money should go to the Milwaukee public schools, rather than charter schools, arguing that strong public schools make a strong community. Ms. Willis sends her 8-year-old daughter to Gwen T. Jackson Early Childhood and Elementary School.

“I feel like it’s a home,” she said. “Whether it is school or personal problems, they have someone there to help.”

Taryn Webb, a 32-year-old mother and administrative assistant, says sending her three children to Milwaukee’s St. Marcus School, a private school that accepts vouchers from the state, has improved her children’s education and future.

“Money for public schools is important,” she said. “But what’s important to me is the education my child receives. I want my child to learn and be equipped so they can grow up to be upstanding citizens.”