



What Trump's First 100 Days Might Mean for Education Policy

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President-Elect Donald Trump has released his plans for his first 100 days in office. After outlining proposals for term limits, a trade war, and mass deportations, the plan includes the following paragraph on education policy:

School Choice And Education Opportunity Act. Redirects education dollars to give parents the right to send their kid to the public, private, charter, magnet, religious or home school of their choice. Ends common core, brings education supervision to local communities. It expands vocational and technical education, and make 2 and 4-year college more affordable.

The details are far from clear, but it appears that his education policy will focus on three areas:

1. School choice

Trump has the right instinct on school choice, but if he is planning to promote a national voucher program, then he's going about it the wrong way. He has previously pledged to dedicate \$20 billion in federal funds to school choice policies, and stated that he would "give states the option to allow these funds to follow the student to the public or private school they attend" as well as using federal carrots to get states to expand choice policies even further. Expanding educational opportunity is admirable, but using the federal government to do so is misguided. As David Boaz explained more than a decade ago in the *Cato Handbook for Congress*, the case against federal involvement in education:

is not based simply on a commitment to the original Constitution, as important as that is. It also reflects an understanding of why the Founders were right to reserve most subjects to state, local, or private endeavor. The Founders feared the concentration of power. They believed that the best way to protect individual freedom and civil society was to limit and divide power. Thus it was much better to have decisions made independently by 13 – or 50 – states, each able to innovate and to observe and copy successful innovations in other states, than to have one decision made for the entire country. As the country gets bigger and more complex, and especially as government amasses more power, the advantages of decentralization and divided power become even greater.

A federal voucher program would very likely lead to increased federal regulation of private schools over time, especially after a new administration takes over that is less friendly to the concept of school choice. As we've seen in some states, misguided regulations can severely undermine the effectiveness of school choice and induce a stifling conformity among schools. Moreover, as I've explained previously, those regulations are harder to block or repeal at the federal level than at the state level, and their negative effects would be far more widespread:

When a state adopts regulations that undermine its school choice program, it's lamentable but at least the ill effects are localized. Other states are free to chart a different course. However, if the federal government regulates a national school choice program, there is no escape. Moreover, state governments are more responsive to citizens than the distant federal bureaucracy. Citizens have a better shot at blocking or reversing harmful regulations at the state and local level rather than the federal level.

That said, the Trump administration can promote school choice in more productive and constitutionally sound ways. The federal government does have constitutional authority in Washington DC, where it currently operates the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). The OSP should be expanded into a universal ESA that empowers all DC families to spend the funds on a wide variety of educational expenses in addition to private school tuition, including tutors, textbooks, online courses, curricular materials, and more, as well as save unused funds for later expenses, such as college. The Trump administration should also explore similar options in areas where the federal government has jurisdiction, such as on Native American lands and military bases.

2. Common Core

Yet again, Trump has the right instinct but the policy leaves much to be desired. Ending Common Core is a noble goal, but it is primarily a matter of state policy and at this point there is little the federal government can do about. As my Cato Institute colleague Neal McCluskey noted yesterday, “the main levers of [federal] coercion — the Race to the Top contest and waivers out of the No Child Left Behind Act — are gone.” The only way for the federal government to get rid of Common Core would be to engage in the same sort of unconstitutional federal coercion that critics of the Core opposed in the first place.

Nevertheless, the Trump administration could ease the path for *states* to ditch Common Core by merely refraining from using its authority under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to dictate state policy. As Neal explained:

What [Trump] can do—and I think, along with a GOP Congress, will do—is ensure that regulations to implement the ESSA do not coerce the use of the Core or any other specific standards or tests. This has been a real concern. While the spirit and rhetoric surrounding the ESSA is about breaking down federal strictures, the Obama education department has been drafting regulations that threaten federal control over funding formulas and accountability systems. And the statute includes language vague enough that it could allow federal control by education secretary veto. A Trump administration would likely avoid that.

3. College and Vocational Education

Here is where Trump's plan is the murkiest. He wants to "expand" vocational education and make college "more affordable" but he does not explain how. His campaign website provides little more in terms of details:

- Work with Congress on reforms to ensure universities are making a good faith effort to reduce the cost of college and student debt in exchange for the federal tax breaks and tax dollars.
- Ensure that the opportunity to attend a two or four-year college, or to pursue a trade or a skill set through vocational and technical education, will be easier to access, pay for, and finish.

These vague bromides could just as easily have appeared on Hillary Clinton's campaign website, which states:

- **Every student should have the option to graduate from a public college or university in their state without taking on any student debt.** By 2021, families with income up to \$125,000 will pay no tuition at in-state four-year public colleges and universities. And from the beginning, every student from a family making \$85,000 a year or less will be able to go to an in-state four-year public college or university without paying tuition.
- **All community colleges will offer free tuition.**
- **Everyone will do their part.** States will have to step up and invest in higher education, and colleges and universities will be held accountable for the success of their students and for controlling tuition costs.

So how will Trump try to expand vocational education and make college more affordable? It's not clear. Ideally, Trump would work to phase out the various federal loan programs and higher ed subsidies that a mountain of research has shown are fueling rapid tuition inflation.

Unfortunately, Trump has previously proposed an income-based student loan repayment plan. Such a policy could assist borrowers in repaying loans, but it would still create perverse incentives that fuel tuition inflation and overconsumption of higher ed while leaving the taxpayer on the hook for whatever the borrower couldn't repay. When a student takes out a \$35,000 loan to pursue a degree in puppeteering and then surprisingly can't find a decent-paying job, taxpayers would pick up the tab.

At this point, it's not clear what Trump will do about education policy. His education proposals are vague and somewhat disconcerting, but there is also evidence that he wants to move in the right direction, particularly regarding school choice and a reduced federal role in K-12 education. What Trump needs now is a set of good advisers to help guide his commendable education policy instincts toward wise and effective policy.

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