

The Bipartisan Rejection of ‘School Choice’

Even in Republican-led states, voucher programs are getting pushback.

Jeff Bryant

June 15, 2022

At the end of the 2020-21 school year, proponents of school voucher programs like the Cato Institute, an influential libertarian think tank, proclaimed having had their “best year” ever. Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of Education under former President Donald Trump, had mainstreamed the once-fringe idea of giving parents public money to pay for private school tuition. Since DeVos opened the floodgates, eighteen states have created voucher programs or expanded existing ones in order to privatize public education.

“School choice is on the march,” declared an op-ed in *Forbes* by Mike McShane, director of national research at EdChoice, using the term branded by advocates for privatizing public schools.

“The fact that private school voucher bills fail even in states where Republicans have full control shows that these schemes are not nearly as popular as Betsy DeVos and others say they are.” – Jessica Levin, director of Public Funds

School choice proponents believed their efforts would get a boost from the coronavirus pandemic, which kept many schools shuttered or turned them into battlegrounds over health precautions such as masks and vaccines. “As the highly contagious Omicron variant complicates the spring school semester and the 2022 midterms ramp up,” *Politico* reported, “GOP strategists say it is an opportune time to also propel . . . school choice.”

The hopes of voucher advocates have also been buoyed by the rightwing assault on schools for a grab bag of issues under the ubiquitous umbrella term “critical race theory.” This label has come to describe nearly any curriculum about race and gender inequities in society, social and emotional learning, and the nation’s shameful history regarding slavery and the extermination of Indigenous peoples.

In February, the Heritage Foundation, a prominent rightwing think tank, issued a report declaring that this so-called culture war was “extremely helpful” in promoting the various forms of new voucher programs being considered in state legislatures. The report urged advocates for school choice to “emphasiz[e] the fact that [critical race theory] is trying to divide parents and that school choice is a solution.”

In 2021, twenty-two states launched or expanded voucher programs; seventy-four more measures to do so were introduced this year. An NBC News headline declared that DeVos “might finally get her wish” in expanding the reach of voucher programs.

But what voucher proponents had not counted on was the pushback—not just from the usual coalition of teachers’ unions, progressives, and grassroots public school advocates, but from bipartisan lawmakers in politically “red” states.

In Oklahoma, a bill to create a voucher-like program that would have given parents publicly funded “savings” accounts to help pay for private school tuition or other education expenses drew opposition from some Republicans. They were concerned that money going to homeschoolers would be diverted from public schools in rural communities—where public schools might be the only real choice families have.

Although the bill was amended to address this and other concerns, it never reached the desk of Republican Governor Kevin Stitt, who had pledged to sign it into law.

In Idaho, a bill to create “education savings accounts” died in committee after GOP lawmakers questioned the constitutionality of giving parents public funds to spend on private schools and other education providers.

A similar bill in Alabama was fobbed off to a study commission after lawmakers, including Republicans, objected to the lack of accountability in how private schools would spend voucher funds. Concerns were also raised about the potential negative impacts on public school budgets in rural communities.

In Georgia, a bill to create a straight-up voucher program sparked opposition from critics who noted the voucher money would exceed what the state currently spends, per pupil, in public schools. Then Republican lawmakers became enraged by mailers sent by the American Federation for Children, a voucher advocacy group founded by DeVos. The letters pressed legislators to quickly pass the bill by accusing them of caving in to the “radical left” (i.e., President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, and former Georgia State Representative Stacey Abrams).

The bill died in the Georgia Senate in a bipartisan vote.

In Utah, Republican legislators introduced a bill to fund a voucher program despite voters having rejected such a program in a statewide referendum fourteen years ago. The state’s Republican governor, Spencer Cox, pledged to veto the bill, which then failed with bipartisan opposition in the state house of representatives.

In Iowa, where the state’s Republican governor has prioritized passing a voucher program, a bill passed the state senate but was omitted in the house. Again, some Republicans opposed the

measure due to lack of accountability in the private sector and potential negative impact on rural public schools. The fate of the voucher program is now in the hands of a bicameral committee.

In Nebraska, for the second year in a row, state lawmakers rejected a voucher program that is opposed by both conservatives and liberals. In Tennessee, Republicans joined with Democrats to block an attempt to resuscitate a voucher-like program, which was overturned by the state's supreme court.

“The fact that private school voucher bills fail even in states where Republicans have full control shows that these schemes are not nearly as popular as Betsy DeVos and others say they are,” says Jessica Levin, the director of Public Funds for Public Schools, a national campaign that uses litigation, advocacy, and research to oppose vouchers and other forms of school privatization.

“There are multiple reasons for these failures,” she says, “including that Republicans representing rural areas know vouchers won't benefit their constituents because of the lack of private schools in these areas and because public schools often are important for jobs and community-building.”

In Texas, efforts to enact vouchers have repeatedly failed due to their unpopularity. As the Reverend Charles Foster Johnson, executive director of Pastors for Texas Children, explains, “Rural Texas Republicans are joining with urban Democrats to oppose vouchers.”

This bipartisanship, according to Johnson, has evolved from Democrats' staunch faith in public institutions and the failure of Republican political leaders—including Texas Governor Greg Abbott—to convince small-town voters that their local schools are hotbeds of radical Marxist indoctrination.

In rural communities and small towns, Johnson notes, local public schools serve as economic, social, and cultural hubs; voters have a great deal of familiarity with their local educators and the people who work in their public schools.

“Don't tell [these voters their] school's principal is a pornographer,” Johnson says, referring to a widespread, far-right conspiracy theory that schools are “grooming” children for sexual exploitation. “[They] know the principal.”

For Johnson, what voucher advocates fail to grasp is that public schools hold a special place in religious, conservative communities, especially in the Bible Belt.

“In the South, Protestantism in general has an affinity for public schools,” Johnson says. To voters in these communities, “education is not a transactional reality. It's not a commodity. It is spiritual and a basic human right.” They regard teaching as being, like the ministry, about “human flourishing.”

Historically, efforts to create school vouchers have often failed when put to the test in statewide referendums. Dating back to the 1960s, efforts to establish voucher plans—or remove state constitutional provisions that bar taxpayer funding for religious institutions—“have a long track

record of failure at the ballot box,” according to a 2018 analysis by Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Republicans have had more success with their privatization agenda by installing federal judges who are sympathetic to creating and expanding vouchers and other efforts to redirect public funds to private schools. In cases that have come before the U.S. Supreme Court, Republican-appointed Justices seem inclined to favor redirecting public education funds to private, and even religious, schools.

Nevertheless, says Levin, “Any politician paying attention knows that polls show massive support for local public schools and increasing distaste for vouchers that take public money away from them.”

Johnson, meanwhile, sees the fight against vouchers and other forms of school privatization as just “heating up in Texas.” Abbott won the Republican gubernatorial primary election and his Democratic challenger, Beto O’Rourke, plans to make support for public schools and opposition to vouchers a top issue in November’s election.

Beyond Texas, Johnson’s organization has helped start like-minded organizations in seven other Southern states where vouchers are a political flashpoint.

“We don’t have membership dues or a platform an organization has to pledge allegiance to,” he says. “Our only condition is that your organization needs to believe in public education and oppose vouchers.”

This sort of grassroots advocacy will be key in voucher fights that will continue to emerge as school privatizers press their campaign. “A key factor in ensuring voucher defeats,” Levin points out, “is robust advocacy by state and local public education supporters.”