



## School choice needs bipartisan voices to grow, panelists say

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Former Democratic Sen. Joel Ford used to be a critic of school choice, but his experiences as a father changed his perspective.

Ford said he wanted to give his daughter the best education possible, but too many schools in his district were either failing or underperforming. It was a challenge, but the former senator got his daughter into a Charlotte-Mecklenburg magnet school.

“What I noticed for my constituents, though, is they didn’t have the same choices or opportunities that my family had,” Ford said. “First of all, you have to understand how to navigate what I call a bureaucratic maze of a magnet program within our local school system.”

When Ford asked his local school board members for ideas in turning around low-performing schools, they often said more money is needed.

Ford spoke Wednesday, June 5, as part of a panel on school choice. [Civitas Institute](#), a conservative public policy organization, and [Cato Institute](#), a libertarian think tank focused on limited government and free markets, organized the event.

Joining Ford on the panel was Neal McClusky, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom; Anna Egalite, assistant professor for the N.C. State University Department of Educational Leadership, Policy and Human Development; Paul “Skip” Stam, former state House Majority Leader and attorney; and Sen. Joyce Krawiec, R-Forsyth. Christopher Hansford, director of state relations for Cato Institute, moderated the discussion.

Ford said he isn’t against traditional public schools, but they aren’t always a good fit for all students. School choice provides an alternative for students who aren’t best served by the traditional public school system. Yet critics argue school-choice initiatives, like charter schools and private school vouchers, defund public schools and lead to resegregation.

With the amount of opposition to school choice, one can become easily discouraged, McClusky said. But school choice across the country has made remarkable progress over the years. Today, millions of children attend some sort of school of choice.

“In the last year or two we are seeing more of a pushback against school choice. Most of it appears to be targeted at charters, which are more widespread in more states,” McClusky said. “But even if you look at a place like California, where most of the activity is happening

legislatively to push back at charters, they're talking about capping charters and stopping the growth."

Legislators aren't talking about getting rid of charters, McClusky said, because people now expect to have some element of school choice.

North Carolina lifted the cap on charter schools in 2011. Since then, the number of charter schools have grown significantly. Today, North Carolina has 184 charter schools serving about 7% of the state's about 1.5 million students. Senate Bill 247, introduced by Senate Democrats, would place a moratorium on charter-school growth while a newly created joint legislative committee would study the impact of charter schools on the local school districts.

The Senate, which is controlled by the Republican Party, isn't likely to move on the bill any time soon, as it missed the crossover deadline. S.B. 247 never got a hearing in the Senate Rules Committee, where it has sat since March. Krawiec said she wants to see the state expand school choice opportunities, not roll back progress.

Stam said he has seen polls showing a majority of Republicans and Democrats support school choice. The highest support for school choice among demographics in North Carolina is with African-Americans, Stam said. Civitas released a poll in January showing broad support for school choice.

"The problem is not with people. The problem is with leaders, the governor, etc., who are just in lock step with certain interest groups," Stam said "It's not a problem at the grassroots level."

Krawiec agreed.

"People overall, no matter what party you are affiliated with, support school choice," Krawiec said. "It's the leadership in the Democratic Party that will not let it happen unless they absolutely have to."

Krawiec said Republicans should support Democratic lawmakers across the aisle who are amicable to school choice and, in turn, find ways to recruit more people to the school-choice cause.

School choice isn't exclusively a partisan issue, as occasionally Democratic legislators will cross the aisle to support choice bills.

Before leaving the General Assembly in 2018, Ford was one of those lawmakers. It hasn't always been easy.

Bipartisanship can be a lot like football, Ford said. When a wide receiver tries to go across the middle, he often gets hit, sometimes quite hard.

"In the political realm, for someone like me who goes across the aisle, that's what happens to us as well. We get popped," Ford said. "I'm doggone determined to find more reasonable people on both sides of the aisle on whatever issue. We just happen to be talking about school choice, where we can continue to advance it and empower families."