



Don't backtrack on school choice

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When it comes to giving parents more control over where their children attend elementary and secondary school, North Carolina has become a national leader. Now that Republicans no longer enjoy veto-proof majorities in the legislature, however, will the state's progress on school choice be arrested or reversed?

That's one of many questions politicians are asking in the aftermath of the 2018 midterm elections, which produced a 16-seat gain for Democrats in the General Assembly. No one can answer it for certain yet, but I tend to think school choice will survive and thrive despite recent shifts in the political winds.

It is certainly true that Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper has been a skeptic, at best, when it comes to the core elements of North Carolina's school-choice strategy: charter schools and assistance to low-income and special-needs students who attend private schools. He and his appointees would prefer to limit charter-school expansion and to reduce if not eliminate funding for the other programs.

If he vetoes a state budget next year over these issues, Republicans do not have enough votes on their own to override. But it is important to remember that Democrats are hardly unified in their opposition to school choice. Some members of the House and Senate are strong supporters of the popular charter schools in their districts, for example. Others believe that opportunity scholarships and educational savings accounts aimed at at-risk and special-needs students are a worthy expenditure of state funds.

To put the issue in a national context, North Carolina's policy commitments to parental choice and competition in education rank us sixth in the nation in educational freedom, according to the Cato Institute, and seventh in the nation on the Parent Power Index, published by the Center for Education Reform.

Moving North Carolina into the top five will require continuing expansion of both charter school enrollments and annual funding for opportunity scholarships, among other things. The top states in school choice, such as Indiana and Florida, have had their schoolchoice reforms in place for a longer time. They serve more of the students in those states.

But North Carolina is headed in the right direction — toward giving parents more authority to direct the education of their children, and toward giving educators and community leaders more opportunities to be innovative in addressing the many needs of our students across the state.

School choice has sometimes proved to be a partisan issue. That's unfortunate. As I have argued many times, both fiscal conservatives and progressives can endorse choice and competition in North Carolina without betraying their fundamental principles.

After all, we have for decades allowed beneficiaries of government programs to make choices among competing providers of critical services. That's how Medicare and Medicaid work. Patients aren't assigned hospitals and doctors based on their home addresses or socioeconomic status. They make that choice for themselves. The underlying assumptions are that individual choice leads to a better fit between patient and provider and that the resulting competition lowers the cost while increasing the quality of services rendered.

Our public policies follow the same course when it comes to nutrition assistance, Section 8 housing vouchers, preschool and day care subsidies, and assistance to students attending private as well as public colleges and universities. To wall off K-12 education as the one place where choice and competition will be largely absent, where the vast majority of students attend schools assigned to them by central authorities, would be odd and counterproductive.

I recognize, however, that some interest groups and individuals disagree vociferously with my argument here. They will push the larger Democratic minorities in the General Assembly, plus as many Republican legislators as will listen, to keep new families from accessing choice programs while imposing much heavier regulation on charter, private and even home schools.

The resulting debate may get testy. The legislative battle may get messy. In the end, though, I don't think North Carolina will take a backward step toward monopoly. I think we'll keep moving forward.