



Conservatives, do school choice right with scholarship tax credits

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Expanding school choice for children throughout the country is something the Trump administration and Republicans in Congress often talk about as a key component of education reform. With Trump stumping for tax reform and the debate beginning to heat up in Congress, the time to act is now.

In more than half the country, school choice programs are proving every day that kids in failing schools can get a better quality education at lower cost. Still, key conservative forces in Washington could stifle an opportunity to advance school choice and bring immediate and tangible help to millions of children, which would be another reason to question Republicans' ability to lead.

The tax reform bill should expand the existing tax incentive for charitable donations to K-12 scholarship funds to help low and middle-income families choose a better school for their child. By changing this charitable incentive from a tax deduction (which lowers taxable income) to a tax credit (which reduces taxes owed), donations to scholarship funds would greatly expand, injecting millions of dollars into the hands of parents for their children's education.

As a tax incentive, it would be private money being used to improve and expand access to educational choice and quality. It's not a new, top-down federal education program.

Expanding K-12 scholarships at the national level has two political obstacles. First, there is American Federation of Teachers' president Randi Weingarten. I expect teacher union leaders and elected officials who sympathize with them to continue their attacks on school choice. They are relentless on this issue, regardless of data — and the number of impoverished, largely minority students who benefit.

Added to this opposition are a few talking heads housed in Beltway conservative think tanks, which are effectively aligning with the unions. Opposition to a 50-state school choice solution, the Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation among them, may influence enough Republican members of Congress to impede an effective school choice plan.

They oppose a national scholarship tax credit for seemingly specious reasons. They conflate it with a larger federal role in education. They adhere to the unrealistic notion that Washington should play almost no role in education, leaving it up to the states to be laboratories for educational choice (of course, states controlled by teachers unions that block choice

opportunities seem not to matter to them). They claim it would lead to overreaching regulation of private schools.

In reality, none of these arguments apply to a national scholarship tax credit.

The scholarship tax credit would be a tax incentive administered by the Treasury Department to encourage private charitable donations to organizations that then empower parents to put their child in a better school. It's not a federal mandate on states and local school districts. It need not involve any expanded role for the Department of Education.

The tax credit approach is actually an outgrowth of the lessons learned from the backlash by millions of parents and teachers against recent federal initiatives, including the Common Core curriculum standards.

States indeed have been educational "laboratories," particularly with school choice. Currently, 29 states have at least one major school choice initiative, among which 18 have scholarship tax credits. The existence and success of school choice in the states — particularly for tax credit scholarships — is a powerful argument in favor of a national scholarship program, not against one.

Tax credit scholarships demonstrably result in life-changing benefits to children in these states. But, the raw special-interest power of teacher unions in many other states, including Minnesota and New York, are the reason state tax credit proposals there were defeated.

All of the state school-choice programs together reach fewer than 600,000 students — and this after nearly three decades.

President Trump and Congress have a chance to provide millions of parents with school choice across all 50 states, and avoid letting special interests stop parents from having access to the school they want for their children.

As they proceed, there are some legitimate issues that need to be recognized and not sacrificed as legislation is developed. This includes protecting the autonomy of private schools, and ensuring the freedom of religion in faith-based schools.

Fear of over-regulation need not block reform. We just need to make sure we do school choice right. Overregulating private schools is a legitimate concern, with or without a national scholarship tax credit. Scholarship tax credits do not involve government money and therefore give no further warrant for the government to over-regulate. It's a merely a private transaction resulting from the government taking in less money — a finding confirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2011.

It's time for the few vocal Beltway conservatives to join common sense reformers and support a national scholarship tax credit. But regardless of whether they do, the president and Congress need to take action to bring school choice to the millions of moms and dads seeking a better education for their children.