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School Choice Movement Celebrates Its ‘Best Year Ever’ Amid Pandemic

Caitlin Dewey

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West Virginia mom Katie Switzer was looking forward to sending her son Alexander to in-person school this fall. She and her husband had spent the pandemic juggling four children under 6 years old and two demanding full-time jobs.

But as the time approached to register her son for kindergarten, Switzer had second thoughts. Months of fractious debate over reopening and masking policies at the local public schools had turned her off.

Instead, the Switzers plan to keep Alexander at home for another year and apply next summer for West Virginia’s new Hope Scholarship program, which grants parents roughly \$4,600 of public funds each year to spend on private school tuition, homeschooling supplies and other educational programs mostly outside of public schools. It is the nation’s first voucher program that is open to all public school students, instead of being limited to those who have disabilities or who attend underperforming schools.

The program is seen by many education analysts as the newest development of the school choice movement, which made unprecedented gains in state legislatures across the country this year. In some cases, the programs divert public funds to send children to private or religious schools. Others provide tax incentives to individuals and corporations that donate to state-run private school scholarship funds.

In addition to the West Virginia program, which state legislators approved along party lines in mid-March, 13 states this year enacted laws to make it easier for parents to transfer their students out of public schools and into other types of institutions, and lawmakers in at least two dozen states have debated such measures. Advocates for vouchers and voucher-like programs credit the chaos of pandemic schooling, and the frustration of parents like Switzer, for giving the movement new momentum.

“It’s our goal to reimagine how we approach education in a way that’s more individualized to the uniqueness of the students,” said Jason Huffman, the West Virginia state director of the libertarian group Americans For Prosperity, which has lobbied for school choice policies

nationwide. “And I think ... everybody in the education space is incentivized, to some extent, to begin individualizing education at this point.”

But the expansion has alarmed many public school teachers and advocates who argue that voucher-like programs chip away at the funding and ideals of public education.

‘New Era’

Charter schools began operating in the United States in the early 1990s, following a wave of new state laws that allowed independent public schools to design their own curriculums and teaching methods. Around the same time, the first “voucher” programs began paying for limited groups of high-needs students to attend private schools on state-funded scholarships.

The policies now surfacing in state legislatures shift from those early programs. Beginning in 2011, a handful of states, led by Arizona, began introducing voucher-like programs called education savings accounts that are broader than vouchers and grant money to parents for a wide range of educational expenses, funded by public dollars or tax-deductible donations.

West Virginia families who receive Hope Scholarships likely will have to shop through a state-run web portal, Huffman said, where private schools, tutors, homeschooling and vocational programs, and educational therapists can register to provide services. Scholarship recipients also may attend public schools part-time, though the amount of scholarship funds available to them for other programs and services decreases with public school instruction.

West Virginia families who feel they aren’t well-served by public schools will be able to design the education that best serves their child, Switzer said. At the same time, school choice advocates argue, greater competition for students will force low-performing public schools to improve.

“My biggest fear, as a parent, is putting my son in an environment where he doesn’t look forward to learning,” Switzer said. She believes Alexander would fare best at a school like the nearby Morgantown Learning Academy, a nonprofit private school that emphasizes outdoor and nature-based education.

The West Virginia chapter of the American Federation of Teachers vocally opposed the Hope Scholarship program on the basis that it “contains minimal anti-discrimination provisions for students” and may “have a negative impact on funding for public schools,” President Fred Albert told *Stateline* in an emailed statement.

In West Virginia, advocates for voucher programs have lobbied for an education savings account program since at least 2017. This year, however, state Republicans gained a supermajority in both chambers just as the pandemic caused thousands of families to reevaluate their children’s schools, said Jessi Troyan, an economist and analyst at West Virginia’s conservative Cardinal Institute, which supports the Hope Scholarship program.

Many rural Republican lawmakers have historically opposed voucher-like programs, because of the economic and cultural role that public schools play in their districts. This pushback explains why many solidly red states, such as Idaho, North Dakota and Wyoming, offer few or no voucher programs, said Michael McShane, the director of national research at EdChoice, an Indiana-based research and advocacy organization.

“But the pandemic shifted opinions over the crest, if you will,” Troyan said. “They said, ‘OK, I got it on paper before—now I get it. I see how this is affecting the people that I represent.’”

Advocates for voucher-like programs in a dozen other states made similar gains this session. Indiana, Kentucky and Missouri all created new education savings accounts this year, with Kentucky’s program passing over the veto of Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear.

Several other states—including Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Montana, Oklahoma and South Dakota—created or expanded “tax-credit scholarships,” which use tax-deductible donations to fund private school scholarships. Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana and Maryland also expanded existing voucher programs.

In April, the libertarian Cato Institute declared 2021 “may be the best year for school choice ever.”

By design, voucher programs divert students and money away from public schools and toward private and religious schools—including, in some cases, schools that discriminate based on religion or sexual orientation, or that teach alternative views on subjects such as American slavery and evolution. In a 2020 investigation, reporters at *The Orlando Sentinel* found that more than 150 private schools in Florida’s voucher program denied admission to LGBTQ students or the children of LGBTQ parents.

Much of the debate around vouchers is philosophical, said Doug Harris, the director of the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice at Tulane University. Should the government support public institutions designed for the common good, or empower individuals to pursue whatever course they deem best? The latter approach privileges families with the resources and time to navigate complex educational systems, opponents say.

“We’ve entered a new era with regard to what, for a long time, has been referred to as ‘school choice,’” said Jack Schneider, a historian and analyst of education policy at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. “But I think it’s more aptly called an effort to unmake public education, because that’s really what it is.”

Mixed Evidence

The evidence that voucher programs benefit students is inconclusive, said Ashley Jochim, a senior research analyst at the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington Bothell. Educational interventions are inherently difficult to study, Jochim said, because they’re complicated by factors outside the classroom, such as poverty, home environment and parental involvement.

Policymakers can also implement and evaluate voucher programs in a variety of ways, muddling efforts to compare them or draw definitive conclusions.

The best evidence, Tulane’s Harris said, suggests that voucher programs don’t damage the overall finances of public schools, which have a variety of funding sources. But the research also does not support broad programs like the ones many states are considering.

In the largest and most robust study to date, published in the journal *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, researchers at Tulane and the University of Arkansas found that low-income students who transferred to private schools under the Louisiana Scholarship Program scored

lower on standardized tests than similar students who remained in public schools. Smaller studies of more targeted programs, however, have found educational benefits, according to Harris and Jochim.

“If there is a consensus, it’s that implementation really matters and that program design is important,” Jochim said.

The politics of vouchers and school choice are difficult to untangle. Originally the project of libertarians such as economist Milton Friedman and free-market Republicans such as President Ronald Reagan, school choice—in the form of public charter schools—also gained momentum under Democratic presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, who saw the schools as innovation centers that could help underserved and underperforming students.

The progressive wing of the Democratic party has been critical of charter schools, however, and the school choice movement became more polarized under former President Donald Trump and his education secretary, Betsy DeVos. As Republicans have embraced charter schools and more sweeping voucher-like measures such as education savings accounts, those ideas have become less attractive to Democrats, said Carol Burris, a former public school principal and the executive director of the Network for Public Education Foundation.

There are exceptions: Black and Hispanic Democrats have sometimes split with their party on vouchers, which some consider a lifeline for pulling their children out of failing schools. Some rural Republicans also have resisted the expansion of voucher-like programs. In Texas, for instance, urban Democrats and rural Republicans have voted down multiple school choice measures. A proposal that would have piloted an education savings account program died in committee this year.

“We make a moral argument that it is God's will for every child to be educated,” said the Rev. Charles Foster Johnson, the executive director of the nonprofit advocacy group Pastors for Texas Children, which grew out of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. “The only way that's going to happen is through a public trust. It will never happen through any private provision. It just won't.”

Texas has become more of an outlier each year, however. Today, according to EdChoice, 29 states—plus Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.—have one or more voucher, education savings account or tax-credit scholarship program.

Many programs also have expanded from limited interventions for students with disabilities to much broader programs, said EdChoice’s Michael McShane.

His home state is a prime example: Indiana’s Choice Scholarship Program, which grants low- and middle-income students vouchers to attend private schools, admitted only 7,500 students when it launched in 2011. Under an expansion that passed this year, eligibility will expand to 80% of Indiana students, roughly 1 million youths.

School choice advocates now are working to protect this year’s gains and are gearing up for battles in other states next session. Voucher-like proposals in Iowa, Montana and New Hampshire all gained traction in at least one legislative chamber this year.

“Over the course of the next year, the next couple years, we're going to continue to see echoes of the pandemic,” McShane said. “We're going to see lots and lots of issues arising. And I think that that's just going to continue to drive parents to say: ‘We need more options.’”