



## What K-12 education could look like under Trump

Vimbai Chikomo

November 18, 2016

One of the people mentioned as a top potential choice for education policy in a Trump administration isn't fully in line with Trump's campaign pledges, but still is seen as a bold reformer.

Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of Washington, D.C. public schools, was mentioned earlier this week by President-Elect Donald Trump's spokesperson, Jason Miller, as one of the women or minorities being considered for the new administration.

While Rhee is an enthusiastic advocate for school-choice initiatives, as is Trump, her support for the Common Core State Standards Initiative, which Trump has promised to end, has raised some eyebrows.

Rhee is scheduled to meet with Trump this weekend -- adding to the guessing game about which direction the new regime will take on school policies.

Trump himself has not spoken on his choice for secretary of Education, but before the election he said the Department of Education would be reduced or completely eliminated under the his administration.

Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, agrees that government should have no place in American classrooms.

"I think the Trump administration should remove the federal government from all levels of education," McCluskey told AMI Newswire. "It has no Constitutional authority to govern in education—education isn't even mentioned in the Constitution, to say nothing of being in the specific, enumerated powers—and there is little evidence it has done much good."

Despite federal and state governments pouring billions of dollars into K-12 education, students attending private schools still perform better, which could be the reason Trump vowed to spend \$20 billion on school choice during his campaign.

McCluskey expects the Trump administration will push a program to encourage states to expand private school choice programs but may face resistance.

“My guess is it will not make it through Congress unless it is relatively small,” he said. “Instead of \$20 billion, more like \$250 million.”

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, enacted in 2002, aimed to ensure all children in America are afforded a good education -- but the requirements placed on schools and educators, and the federal government’s involvement in K-12 assessments, made the law unpopular, particularly among conservatives.

In December 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to replace NCLB, shifting the responsibility of standardized testing requirements under NCLB from the federal government to state governments – a victory for conservatives.

McCluskey noted that while younger children had gains under No Child Left Behind, scores for 17-year-olds remained flat, as they have been for decades.

“While the goal should be to remove Washington from education, that cannot be done easily or quickly,” McCluskey said. “What I expect is little call to increase the funding or scope of federal programs, and efforts, perhaps, to end some relatively minor programs, including, perhaps, student loan programs like Parent PLUS that are poorly targeted to the truly needy.”

Jason Bedrick, policy analyst for Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, said Trump’s desire to expand school choice is commendable, but advised against a nationwide federal voucher program because it would not be beneficial and the federal government does not have the constitutional authority to enact one.

“The dangers of federal regulations outweigh the benefits of expanding school choice nationwide. School choice policies are best left to the states,” Bedrick said.

With the new administration comes renewed opportunity to steer education in the right direction.

Lindsey Burke, the Will Skillman fellow in education policy at the Heritage Foundation, said that conservatives view this as an opportunity to reexamine all of the programs that have accumulated over the years because they are tying the hands of state and local leaders.

“And we know that has had no impact on student educational outcomes,” Burke said.

Good policy would be cutting some of the ineffective programs, particularly competitive grant programs, Burke said, and then with some of the remaining funding -- like the Title I dollars -- give states the option to make those funds portable to follow a child to any school of choice.

Another hot-button issue in K-12 education has been the Common Core national curriculum standards, which sets standards on what students should know in English and math, and has been adopted by 45 states – a fact Common Core supporters often laud.

However, those opposing the standards say states were incentivized to participate by the Obama administration offering programs like “Race to the Top,” a competitive grant created to reward states for reforms in K-12 education.

Burke said that although Trump wouldn't have the capacity to control whether states decide to adopt or continue to enforce the standards, he could be instrumental in encouraging states to take back control of their schools.

"There's an opportunity for strong rhetorical support for the idea that states should exit Common Core and work to reclaim their state education decision-making authority when it comes to standards and assessments," Burke said. "But at that point, it's really up to governors and state legislature to then exit Common Core."