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Paul touts education issues in public, not on Hill

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By Maggie Severns

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Sen. Rand Paul has touted school choice in Milwaukee and Chicago and goaded former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush about the Common Core on cable news.

But he's rarely seen working on education policy in the one place he could have a direct effect: the Senate.

Paul has sat on the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee since 2011 and is co-chairman of its subcommittee on children and families, but he seldom attends committee hearings or works on the daily grind of writing letters or authoring bills. Paul did not attend any of the five education hearings held by the committee this year, a POLITICO review has found.

Three of those hearings focused on rewriting the country's hallmark education law, No Child Left Behind, which senators are striving to rewrite this year. The law steers billions of dollars in aid to high-poverty schools, governs teacher-preparation programs, addresses school choice programs and defines the federal role in encouraging academic standards, such as the Common Core.

In February, the Kentucky senator raised eyebrows when he [told](#) CNBC and others that vaccines for children should be "voluntary" — but he was absent a week later when the committee met to discuss the subject. Paul isn't the only one on the committee with spotty attendance (though he's the only one among them running for president): Of the 22 committee members, seven had not attended any K-12 education hearings this year. Five senators — Michael Bennet (D-Colo.), Bob Casey (D-Pa.), Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) and committee leaders Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) and Patty Murray (D-Wash.) — attended all four. (Fellow Republican contender Sen. Ted Cruz is not on the education committee.)

An aide for Paul said that the senator "is one of the most active members of the U.S. Senate. In that same time frame, he has made more than 98 percent of the votes in the Senate and authored

more than 50 bills and amendments, all the while maintaining a full schedule of meetings with Kentuckians in his office.”

When there are scheduling conflicts, the aide said the senator has chosen to spend his time hearing from Kentuckians and get a report from staff on what he might have missed at Hill meetings.

So far Paul is focusing his education platform on two conservative crowd-pleasers: school choice and the Common Core.

“If you have a national curriculum and rules, you’ll never get new ideas. Once education is nationalized one person can insert bias into the curriculum,” Paul says in an education-themed [video](#) on his website. “That’s why I oppose Common Core.”

Paul was more blunt in interviews last fall: A candidate that supports the Common Core “probably doesn’t have much chance of winning in a Republican primary,” he [told](#) Breitbart News in October, and he’s echoed the comments several times since. Opposing the standards has become a way for politicians to signal they have small-government, conservative views.

“The main thing that he’s providing is rhetoric at this point,” said Neal McCluskey, associate director at the Cato Institute. This could be due to the realities of the Senate, McCluskey said, which was in Democratic hands until recently.

Ask Capitol Hill insiders which stars of the GOP have been leading on school choice, and they may name a presidential contender with a lower profile on the issue than Paul: Sen. Marco Rubio, who is not on the education committee but has won respect from fellow lawmakers as an education wonk. Rubio, who spent years in the Florida Legislature, has written and co-sponsored voucher [legislation](#) and bills on school safety, computer science and college savings accounts, as well as a slew of [proposals](#) for updating the student loan system in recent years. (Cruz also supports school choice and abhors the Common Core.)

Paul has had one big moment on the Senate education committee. Soon after he arrived in the chamber in 2011, a previous attempt to rewrite No Child Left Behind was underway. Paul cried foul when committee leaders went to mark up their bill, saying that the process for writing it hadn’t been transparent enough because there weren’t hearings and the bill had only been released days prior. He filed over 70 amendments to the bill at the committee markup and refused to withdraw them unless there was a hearing on the legislation. Paul got his hearing — a month after the markup — and the bill passed the committee.

More recently, Paul has spoken at events in Chicago, Milwaukee and Philadelphia promoting school choice, including charter schools and vouchers.

“I want all our children to have the same opportunities that I had,” Paul said Tuesday during the official announcement of his 2016 candidacy. “We need to stop limiting kids in poor

neighborhoods to failing public schools.” Paul has not attached himself to many pieces of education legislation but did introduce a measure with Alexander in 2013 that would allow states to block-grant federal education money and use it as they please, including for private school vouchers. He recently has signed onto bills addressing charter schools and the Common Core but was not listed as an original co-sponsor.

The issue “fits in very well with his libertarian philosophy and it also fits in well in his outreach to non-traditional constituents” such as poor and minority voters, said Mike Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Paul has also zoomed in on criminal justice reform, another issue that could help him win appeal from a traditionally Democratic group of voters.

During the primary season, Paul and others may win fans with their messages on education without having to offer specific legislative proposals, Petrilli said.

“You can probably get away with being not very clear about what it means in federal policy,” Petrilli said.

Meanwhile, current and former governors may be confronted with their records on the Common Core standards and Obama’s education initiatives. While 2016 presidential contenders including Jeb Bush, Scott Walker and Chris Christie all have significant experience with education policy from which to draw on the campaign trail, they also have history with the Common Core to defend. Hillary Clinton, who is expected to announce her bid for president this weekend, will meanwhile have to [grapple](#) with how closely she wants to align herself with teachers unions.

The push to rewrite No Child Left Behind may pose a similar challenge for senators. Paul will have to take a stance on some difficult education issues as soon as next week, when the Senate HELP Committee marks up its bill.

Paul told POLITICO earlier this year he supported Alexander’s proposed No Child Left Behind bill. But that was before Alexander began negotiating a fix with Murray, his Democratic counterpart on the panel, [which was unveiled Tuesday](#). The new bill is more moderate than Alexander’s original proposal, and an aide said that Paul is still reviewing it but plans to be active at next week’s markup.

Conservative opposition also [stalled House Republicans’ proposed version of NCLB](#) earlier this year as members on the right said it didn’t do enough to roll back federal overreach in education.

“The calculus changed after what happened in the House,” said Andy Smarick, partner at Bellwether Education Partners. “I think that’s going to put a lot of these candidates in a tough position.”