



## **Will school choice gain ground under new education proposals?**

**By Emily Scheie**

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Both houses of Congress hope soon to pass a bill fixing or replacing the federal education law No Child Left Behind (NCLB). While standardized testing and accountability for schools have dominated much of the debate, policymakers also dispute how the law should address issues of school choice.

Some Republicans say the NCLB re-write can improve education by supporting charter schools and allowing a student's federal funding to go to the school the student chooses to attend. But that proposal has opposition from both sides. Democrats say such tactics would hurt schools in poor communities, while advocates for limited government would prefer federal lawmakers stay out of local education decisions as much as possible.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act—originally signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson 50 years ago—became known as No Child Left Behind when Congress reauthorized it under President George W. Bush in 2002. It has been up for reauthorization for more than seven years, but the current Congress has made the issue a top priority.

Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., has led much of the discussion as chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. On Wednesday, he spoke in favor of expanding school choice, during an event hosted by the Brookings Institution. He noted two instances of school choice already supported by the government: college students use federal grants but pick their own schools, and the Child Care and Development Block Grant program gives parents vouchers to pay for the child care they choose.

“If we trust parents to choose child care for their children, and if we trust them to help their children choose a college to attend—and both those systems have been so successful and are so widely supported—then why do we not also trust parents to choose the best elementary and high school for their children?” Alexander asked.

The draft legislation Alexander released supports starting and expanding charter schools. It also would give states the option to allow Title I funds, about \$1,300 per student below the poverty line, to go directly to the public school each poor child attends.

In the House, Reps. John Kline, R-Minn., and Todd Rokita, R-Ind., introduced on Tuesday the Student Success Act, an NCLB replacement. Among other measures, it “empowers parents with more school choice options by continuing support for magnet schools and expanding charter school opportunities, as well as allowing federal funds to follow low-income children to the traditional public or charter school of the parent’s choice,” according to a press release issued by the House Education and the Workforce Committee.

But democrats on the committee oppose the plan: “We all agree that No Child Left Behind needs to be fixed, but it has become frighteningly clear that the Republican bill would make things worse,” Rep. Robert C. Scott, D-Va., said in a statement.

Many are especially worried about allowing federal funds to follow children, a concept known as the “portability provision.” At a Thursday forum attended by Democratic committee members, Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust, called such provisions “a wolf in sheep’s clothing ... that take dollars away from the poorest schools and districts to send to the more affluent ones.”

In his written statement for the same forum, the Cato Institute’s Neal McCluskey called school choice “the key to sustained innovation in education and empowerment of all families.” But “the federal government should not attempt to foster choice, including helping charter schools, as the Senate and House bills do,” he said. Instead, it should be “a decision made at the state level.”