

Opinion: Youngkin can bolster school choice through budget action

Neal McCluskey

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It is widely believed that Gov. Glenn Youngkin pulled off an upset victory over former Gov. Terry McAuliffe based on one thing: McAuliffe blew off parent power in education while Youngkin embraced it. At least, he embraced it rhetorically. With the budget passed by the General Assembly on June 1 slashing the state's already tiny private school choice program, now is the time for Youngkin to show whether he really supports parent power, or is just talk.

The program in question is the state's Education Improvement Scholarships Tax Credits (EISTC), which provides donors to private school scholarship funds 65% credits on their state income taxes. Donate \$1,000 to support Montessori, Catholic or other types of education that fit your educational philosophy or moral values better than public schools and get a \$650 credit.

Of course, those scholarships empower families, in particular lower-income, who can choose schools that are more effective, or better meet their values or needs, than their assigned public school, without having to pay twice: once in taxes, a second time in tuition.

The total amount of credits Virginians can claim is currently capped at \$25 million. That's microscopic compared to the more than \$7.3 billion the state delivered to public elementary and secondary schools in 2020, the most recent year with federal data. Yet the budget would cut the cap to \$12 million, which is less than the nearly \$13 million in credits issued in 2021, and the \$15 million that the Virginia Catholic Conference is reporting have been claimed in the current fiscal year.

Youngkin can veto that provision or seek an amendment to the bill.

The timing for this is extraordinary. Not only did Youngkin quite possibly get elected on the promise of empowering parents, it was a major issue because COVID-19 proved how important choice is. Different families faced different levels of health threat and had different educational needs. But any given public school to which a child was assigned could typically only provide in-person or online delivery, or one masking policy, for everyone.

With public schooling, all children have to try to cram into one size, which at best ensures many people do not get education well-tailored to them. With school choice, everyone can seek what fits them best.

If anything, the state needs to drastically expand the EISTC, and do a lot more to advertise that it exists. Keeping it relatively quiet is likely a major reason claims have not hit \$25 million. A program that empowers both families and taxpayers — the latter get to choose, too — should not be kept hush-hush.

Unfortunately, Youngkin has said nary a word about the EISTC, either when it comes to empowering families generally or the budget specifically. Instead, he has played up his “lab schools” proposal, in which public and private colleges would oversee autonomous and innovative public schools.

The proposal is better than nothing, but it is far too constrained to be real parent empowerment. These would be public schools, subject to state tests, standards and necessarily secular. You get what the state wants, and if you think religion is important — and religion is big in burning issues like disputed school library books and student pronoun policies — then you still must pay for public schools that might violate your values, and tuition on top of that for schools that don’t.

Of course, if your district has removed books that you think should remain, or is hostile to LGBTQIA, racial or other minority students, you need real power to choose something else, too.

Youngkin might have reached the Governor’s Mansion based on the promise to empower parents. If he does not fight to at least preserve the full EISTC, the promise will seem very empty.

Neal McCluskey is a resident of Alexandria and directs the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.