



Heritage Panel Warns Trump About Making School Choice a Federal Program

A panel of education policy experts agree the Trump administration appears to be moving toward some form of federal management of school choice, but warns that attempts to influence school choice policy from Washington, D.C. could undermine the president's stated goals of returning education decisions back to the states and local governments.

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March 31, 2017

The [panel](#) convened at the Heritage Foundation in the wake of Trump's [statement](#) during his address to Congress that education is "the civil rights issue of our time." The school choice theme that Trump has [adopted](#) since the tail end of his presidential campaign has been largely directed at minority children who are stuck in failing public schools and whose parents or guardians may not have the financial means to transfer them to a private or religious school.

Trump's choice for U.S. Education Secretary – Betsy DeVos – worked in her home state of Michigan primarily on school choice and school voucher programs, which allow families to use taxpayer funds for tuition at private and religious schools.

On the campaign trail, the president proposed block granting \$20 billion to families for school choice, and in his recently released budget, he [proposed](#) an additional \$1.4 billion be spent on school choice programs in 2018.

Trump also urged Congress to design legislation that funds school choice for low-income families. One such bill, [H.R. 610](#), introduced by Iowa Rep. Steve King (R), has been vehemently opposed by [homeschooling families](#) across the country because of concerns the legislation will result in regulation of homeschooling nationwide.

The panel, led by American Enterprise Institute education fellow Gerard Robinson, discussed ideas on how the federal government might attempt to actually implement school choice policy, whether through financial mechanisms such as school vouchers, education savings accounts, or tax credit scholarships, in which organizations obtain tax credits for donating scholarship funds to individual students or groups of students.

“When I hear folks talking about getting Washington involved in tuition tax credits for scholarship-granting organizations, and I hear the proposals that are being broadly floated, it makes me extraordinarily nervous,” said American Enterprise Institute education policy director Frederick (Rick) Hess. “It takes me very much back to 2000, and the 24-page document that the Bushes drafted that was the original No Child Left Behind.”

Hess also pointed out the tremendous effects a federal tax credit scholarship program could have on the demands for private schools in the education market.

“If we get into Washington doing scholarship-granting organization tax credits...this is going to have enormous effects on private schools, because it’s going to distort the marketplace,” he said. “They’re going to need to be eligible for these funds.”

Hess also explained the potential “strings” attached to federal taxpayer dollars as they go to private and religious schools, especially those that are strapped for cash and are willing to go to great lengths to obtain the funding. He warns that a future, more liberal Congress and administration would likely attach greater regulations to those schools.

“When you get a Democratic administration, an Elizabeth Warren administration, and they decide that eligible schools ... need to have anti-bullying programs and other accommodations?” he said. “We will very quickly wind up and wonder, ‘What the hell were we thinking, inviting Washington into these decisions?’”

EdChoice president Robert Enlow’s think tank was once called the Milton Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice – named after the noted libertarian economist. Enlow said only a “small set” of people in Washington, D.C. are currently dealing with school choice options, and that no one has attempted to build consensus around a specific plan as yet. He cautioned, however:

“Milton Friedman said it to me directly a million times: “The only thing that worries me about school choice is government intervention.” The only thing that worries me about a federal tax credit program is government intervention, because we have to be very, very cognizant about the rules and regulations that will be brought out to bear on non-profits around the country.”

Enlow said that while a big influx of federal cash could help low-income kids get out of failing schools, the potential federal regulations attached to the funding could extend to many issues, including the hiring and firing policies of non-profits.

The panelists agreed, nevertheless, that the Trump administration should be encouraged to focus as much attention as possible on those areas over which the federal government does maintain jurisdiction with regard to education: schools in the capital district of Washington, D.C., in federal Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, and those on military installations.

Cato Institute education policy director Neal McCluskey said he suspects Washington, D.C. will develop a “tax credit proposal,” that could come up in a tax plan.

He reminded attendees the Constitution “does not give the federal government the authority to intervene in education like this, to govern education, and that includes to spend money on education, to have tax credits...”

“The reasons the Constitution doesn’t do this is we want federalism, and there are real advantages to federalism,” McCluskey added, explaining that if the federal government creates a tax credit or voucher program, it is likely that effort would “crowd out” whatever states are already doing to provide school choice.

Such a move by the federal government could “kill the ‘laboratories of democracy’” when it comes to education, he warned:

“We want to have states trying different ways to deliver education and deliver school choice so we can see what works well, what works well for specific populations, and – only when you have this competition – can you start to really see what might work better than what we think right now is the best program.”

McCluskey added to dismiss federalism would be “dangerous” for the nation.

Lindsey Burke, education policy director at the Heritage Foundation, agreed that while “there is general consensus we’re going to see some movement at the federal level on school choice,” she fears federal control of school choice policy across the country could lead to the “homogenization of school supply.”

Burke added that states also have more flexibility and can more easily make corrections to school choice systems when needed, while change in the federal government happens much more slowly, if at all.