

POLITICO

Trump unveils \$20B school choice proposal

Caitlin Emma

September 8, 2016

Donald Trump unveiled a **school choice plan** on Thursday that would create a \$20 billion block grant to expand charter and private school options for low-income children — an idea championed by conservatives, but which has previously fizzled in Congress.

"As your president, I will be the nation's biggest cheerleader for school choice," he said, vowing to use the presidential bully pulpit and campaign in all 50 states for the proposal.

Story Continued Below

Trump said expanding school choice would help minority students who are currently trapped in "failing government schools." But the backdrop for Trump's speech was an

Ohio charter school that is itself failing.

Trump made his remarks at the Cleveland Arts and Social Sciences Academy, a small school **located** in a predominantly African-American neighborhood of the city.

Nearly all of the school's students, in kindergarten through eighth grade, are African-American and eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch, according to the most recently available federal data. CASSA was **rated highly** by the nonprofit education group Battelle for Kids in 2014 for making year-to-year progress on student learning, but the school's **latest state report card** essentially labels it a failure. CASSA earned an "F" for overall student progress in math and reading.

Early in his speech, Trump thanked Ron Packard, who is the CEO of the for-profit education company that runs the Cleveland charter school. Packard is a national figure in the charter school movement who is also active in supporting political campaigns.

Trump said his proposed block grant program would come from redirecting existing federal funds, and he would leave it up to states to decide whether the dollars would follow children to public, private, charter or magnet schools. He didn't specify which existing federal programs would lose funding to pay for this new initiative.

The notion of portable funding to expand school choice has been backed by conservatives like former Republican nominee Mitt Romney, who made it a big part of his education platform in 2012.

Trump's proposal bears resemblance to a **2014 bill** introduced by **Lamar Alexander** (R-Tenn.), a leading senator on education issues. That legislation would have redirected federal funding to millions of poor children, which they could use to attend private or public schools of their choice.

When Congress rewrote No Child Left Behind, Alexander and Indiana Republican Rep. **Luke Messer** (R-Ind.) introduced amendments that would have allowed federal dollars to follow students to public or private schools. But the amendments didn't make it into the final bills.

The Hillary Clinton campaign on Thursday blasted Trump's new plan, saying it would "gut" nearly 30 percent of the federal education budget to fund private school vouchers, and "decimate public schools across America."

Clinton's campaign said Trump would have to cut all federal Title I funding for poor students, in addition to \$5 billion in additional federal education funding, to pay for the proposal.

Hillary for America senior policy adviser Maya Harris said the "proposal could strip funding from up to 56,000 public schools serving more than 21 million children" and it "might only serve 1.4 million students, while stripping funding from the other 10.5 million low-income students in America."

The libertarian Cato Institute had a lukewarm reaction.

Said Cato's Neal McCluskey: "Donald Trump is right to emphasize school choice: It is the key to empowering parents to get the education that is best for their unique children, and for educators to teach how they want and try new, innovative approaches. But this is not something that should come from Washington. The federal government has no constitutional authority to meddle in education, and as it has proven over the last several decades — including by coercing states to adopt the Common Core — once it starts paying for education it starts controlling it, telling everyone what to do and how to do it."

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools wouldn't say whether it's supportive of Trump's plan because the organization hasn't seen all of the details. But the group lauded presidential candidates generally for focusing on school choice.