



Conservatives to DeVos: Be careful what you wish for on school choice

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By her own admission, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos came here to push the USA's public education system to support not just public schools, but also private and religious schools.

A leading proponent of private-school choice, the GOP mega-donor last January asked lawmakers during her Senate confirmation hearing, "Why, in 2017, are we still questioning parents' ability to exercise educational choice for their children?"

GOP lawmakers on Capitol Hill have already responded, floating several proposals to give families taxpayer-funded tuition and federal tax credits to help them send their kids to the school of their choice. On Wednesday, DeVos delivers the keynote at [annual D.C. event](#) that ranks the nation's 100 largest school districts by how well they deliver on private-school options, among others.

But even with the legislative and executive branches controlled by Republicans, conservative policy wonks in DeVos' own party are warning: When it comes to school choice, be careful what you wish for.

"I think that there are real reasons to be worried about how on earth this thing comes out right," Mike Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a right-leaning D.C. education think tank, told USA TODAY.

While school choice advocates steadfastly support the federal government underwriting small private-school voucher efforts in places like Washington, D.C., and in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, among others, even these folks caution that the Trump administration should think twice before expanding school choice nationwide. On the campaign trail, Trump proposed giving families \$20 billion for school choice. In his 2018 budget, he proposed \$1.4 billion in new spending on school choice.

“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 the American Enterprise Institute’s Rick Hess.

At a forum on the topic held last week at the conservative Heritage Foundation, Hess and others said that perhaps the biggest concern was what federal regulations and oversight could do to an eclectic, and in some cases thriving, private-school market.

Total private spending on K-12 education, Hess said, equals about \$50 billion to \$60 billion annually. Adding \$20 billion more, Hess said, could replace much of parents’ spending, giving the federal government a 30% market share in the sector.

“This is going to have enormous effects on private schools,” Hess said, “because it’s going to distort the marketplace.”

To become eligible for the funding, he said, schools will likely do whatever it takes. With Republicans in the White House and in control of Congress, regulations would likely remain minimal for now. But he asked what happens “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? We will very quickly wind up and wonder, ‘What were we thinking?’”

Robert Enlow, president and CEO of EdChoice, a think tank formerly known as the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation after the libertarian economist Milton Friedman, said that if DeVos offered families a federal voucher or tax credit, “a lot of kids could get help.”

But, he added, the money could distort hiring policies and guidelines on who gets admitted to private schools.

“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.”

Heritage’s Lindsey Burke said federal intervention could lead to the “homogenization of school supply.”

She noted that many states are already thinking about how to extend school choice by offering 529-type K-12 education savings accounts. Bigfooting these efforts with a federal voucher or tax credit, she said, “do we sort of snuff out what is, in my opinion, a more innovative option?”

As an alternative, Burke suggested that DeVos simply supercharge school choice in Washington, D.C., schools, a 48,500-student district that is already under the jurisdiction of Congress. “We would be silly not to encourage the administration to focus as much as they can on D.C.,” she said. She also suggested offering more choice to students in federal Bureau of Indian Affairs schools and at U.S. military installations.

Neal McCluskey of the Cato Institute agreed, adding that a federal voucher or tax credit “can essentially push out of the way programs that have been created by states . . . and that kills what Justice (Louis) Brandeis called ‘laboratories of democracy.’ We want to have states trying different ways of trying to deliver education and school choice, so we can see what works well, what works well for specific populations.”

Noting that school choice allows families to “vote with their feet” by choosing another school, he added, “The way you vote with your feet against the federal government is you’ve got to move to another country, which can be somewhat onerous.”

Petrilli said accepting federal funding could be most painful to private — and especially religious — schools, which will face “really difficult choices.” Would the funding force them to accept LGBTQ students — or teachers, for that matter — against their religious beliefs?

“They just won’t participate,” he said. “And then what’s the point? You don’t have a program.”