



## **Public education at a crossroads? Surge in schooling options tests US model.**

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Caroline Simmonds recently spotted an advertisement on Facebook for free learning pods in New Hampshire. The mom of two eagerly signed up to learn more.

“The pandemic pushed me over the edge,” says Ms. Simmonds, in an interview after attending a learning pod information session. “I’ve never been a big fan of the public schools, but once COVID hit, I was like, something has to be done.”

Ms. Simmonds, who wants her children to have smaller classes and the option not to wear masks, stuck with public school in Manchester last year. Now she’s considering withdrawing her kids to join new tuition-free learning pods sponsored by the state.

In New Hampshire and elsewhere across the United States, a number of mostly Republican-led states acted this year to provide parents like Ms. Simmonds access to state funding for educational options outside of traditional public schools. School choice advocates are declaring 2021 the “year of educational choice,” while some public school backers warn of fracturing support for the role public education plays in cultivating a strong democracy.

Most Americans share an “overarching view” that a well-educated populace is desirable for the country’s success, yet many are divided on how to achieve that goal, says Joseph Waddington, an associate professor of education at the University of Kentucky.

“It’s a question of how we do that, and that’s where factions of individualism versus collectivism come into play, and are some of the root motivating factors not just driving conversations around education, but so many of the prevalent conversations around society today,” he says.

In 2021, state legislators created seven new school choice programs in seven states, and expanded 21 existing programs in 14 states, according to EdChoice, a school choice advocacy organization. Programs range from education savings accounts in Kentucky and West Virginia, to an expanded tax-credit scholarship program in Nevada.

“Not only were there more bills than we usually see, but the types of programs, the expansiveness of the programs, that’s what really sets this year apart,” says Michael McShane, director of national research at EdChoice.

For supporters of school choice, the COVID-19 disruption proved that more alternatives are needed in public education. They cite parent demand, as evidenced by the 3% drop in public school enrollment between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, and the 7% increase in charter school enrollment and doubling of the home-schooling rates during that same time. An appetite for education options will continue, they say.

Opponents warn that the wave of legislation is an effort to take advantage of a health crisis to push an agenda that will weaken funding for public education and undermine the American promise to provide all students with a quality education.

“Public education is the singular institution in the United States of America that says, come to us and we will treat you all on equal terms,” says Derek W. Black, author of “Schoolhouse Burning:

Public Education and the Assault on American Democracy.” Without strong public schools, Americans risk falling education levels and more polarization, he says.

“This nation was founded on the idea of educated voters. It was also fully evident, and remains true today, that a good number of us if forced to get education on our own either couldn’t afford it or wouldn’t go do it,” Professor Black says.

### New Hampshire’s choice options

Struggles over public education were already flaring before the pandemic in ideologically divided New Hampshire, a state where Democratic candidates have won the electoral votes in the past five presidential elections, yet Republicans currently control the governorship and both houses of the state legislature. The state’s education commissioner has drawn criticism for his lack of professional experience in education and decision to home-school his seven children.

Nationally, Republican lawmakers are more likely to vote for school choice policies. A recent analysis by researchers for the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) of a sampling of state school choice laws passed between 1990 and 2021 showed choice programs were overwhelmingly passed with votes by Republican lawmakers.

Republican leaders in New Hampshire developed two new school choice programs this year. In April, the state’s education commissioner used federal COVID-19 relief funds to sign a \$6 million contract with Prenda, a private microschool company, to run K-8 learning pods for small groups of students to address pandemic learning losses. In June, state legislators created Education Freedom Accounts, an education savings account program that allows qualifying families to receive state funds for use on private school tuition, tutoring, or home-schooling costs.

About 100 students are signed up for community learning pods in New Hampshire through Prenda as of late September, according to company CEO Kelly Smith, and six public school districts have signed on to create school district pods. None of the district pods have formed so far due to operational challenges like finding space and staff.

As of Oct. 1, more than 1,500 applications for Education Freedom Accounts have been completed and sent to the state's Department of Education, according to Kate Baker Demers, executive director of the New Hampshire Children's Scholarship Fund, the nonprofit scholarship organization currently administering the program.

The education savings account attracted Allison Dyer, from Nashua, whose daughter attended public school for two years before enrolling this school year at a Roman Catholic school where she isn't required to wear a mask. The single mother says she budgeted initial funds for private school tuition, but rising food and gas costs are burdensome. She applied for an Education Freedom Account and hopes to receive funding in November.

Sending any state funding to private options worries Megan Tuttle, president of NEA-NH, the state's largest teachers union, noting that public schools serve about 90% of New Hampshire students and pointing to studies showing that New Hampshire ranks highly on educational outcomes.

"When public schools were put into place, the idea was we know we're paying for this as a public because we want our future to be positive," she says. She criticizes using taxpayer money for private schools, which she doesn't think have the same level of "accountability or transparency."

Professor Waddington, who researches the impact of school choice programs, says research on outcomes is mixed with some successes and failures. He says that research overwhelmingly

points to poor results from virtual charter schools and wonders about recent moves in states like West Virginia to expand that option.

“[It] makes one question whether or not legislators’ priorities are on providing kids with quality opportunities, or whether or not they are emboldened and embracing this general concept of freedom to choose,” he says.

Could more choices quell debate?

At a time when the pandemic has sparked culture wars over public health measures and teaching about systemic racism, some advocates suggest that school choice policies can help lower tensions by allowing families to select schools that align with their values.

“What it does is it lowers the stakes of those debates and lowers temperatures because you aren’t caught by a zero-sum game; either you get what you want from public money or not,” says Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Robert Pondiscio, an advocate for school choice and a senior fellow at AEI, a right-of-center think tank, expresses some concern about encouraging choice policies as a means of lowering the stakes of pandemic culture wars.

“I’m troubled by a version of choice that is limited to conflict avoidance. The argument for choice [should be] to enhance the richness of education,” says Mr. Pondiscio.

Instead of focusing on school choice as a means to give parents money and let them sort out school quality, U.S. policymakers should more seriously consider educational pluralism as a model, suggests Ashley Berner, director of the Institute for Education Policy at Johns Hopkins University and author of “No One Way to School.” She points to countries like the Netherlands

and United Kingdom and parts of Canada, where governments fund a variety of schools, including religious options, and maintain performance standards that schools must meet.

Other observers point to innovations within public schools, such as alternative schools and magnet schools, that deserve more attention and replication.

Mr. McShane of EdChoice says “the stars aligned” this year and he doesn’t expect as many school choice bills to pass state legislatures in 2022. He hopes that as more families participate, a political constituency grows and programs continue to expand.

Parents want a say

Back in New Hampshire, Ms. Dyer explains that she’s withdrawing her child from public schools in part because she feels the school board isn’t involving parents enough with decisions.

That’s a lament that Keri Rodrigues, a Massachusetts mom, says she hears often. Ms. Rodrigues is founding president of the National Parents Union, a group representing parents traditionally underrepresented in education advocacy work such as parents of color, foster parents, and formerly incarcerated parents. The group has received funding from the Walton Family Foundation, which has also funded school choice endeavors.

Ms. Rodrigues says the status quo in education wasn’t working for many families before the pandemic, and she believes parents will insist on more educational options in the future, through public school innovations or other school models.

“Whether we like it or not, parents are participating in school boards. They are raising their voices and organizing online and offline; they are more invested,” she says. “They plan to continue being engaged going forward.”

In Manchester, Ms. Simmonds says she thinks a pod could be a good fit for her children after listening to the pitch from Prenda in a Panera Bread cafe. She's taking steps toward enrolling, but will watch the program closely for its outcomes.

"If I join I'll take it a year at a time, and make sure they're learning and it's not just play," she says. "This seems a little like unschooling and I see the beauty in that, but I do also see the benefits of a structured classroom."