



Conservative Education Policy Experts to Trump: Don't Pursue Federal School Choice

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Top conservative education policy experts are warning the White House not to pursue federal programs for school choice – a pillar of the administration’s education agenda – just as lawmakers prepare to debate the mechanism for implementing a major part of it.

“Trump deserves credit for seeing the need to weaken a government monopoly, let parents choose the best education for their unique children and leave educators free to teach as they see fit,” they wrote in a co-authored op-ed in the Washington Post. “But there is great risk in federalizing choice: He who pays the piper calls the tune, and federal control could ultimately impose the same regulations on once-independent schools that have stifled public institutions.”

The shot across the bow comes as lawmakers ready their return to the Capitol next week with tax reform at the top of their agenda – widely speculated as the main vehicle being considered for a private school program in the form of a scholarship tax credit.

Trump has pledged to direct \$20 billion to school choice policies, including public school choice options, like charter schools, as well as private school choice options, including vouchers, savings accounts and tax credits.

But Lindsey Burke, the director of the Heritage Foundation’s Center for Education Policy, Neal McCluskey, the director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, and Vicki Alger, a research fellow at the Independent Institute, urged the administration to shelve the idea, arguing that federal programs would open schools up to regulations antithetical to ideals on which they were founded.

“If something were to go wrong at even one or two schools accepting scholarship students, choice opponents and ‘accountability’ hawks would likely head right to the regulatory presses,” they warned.

Instead, they suggest Trump increase funding for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship, which provides low-income students in the nation’s capital with up to \$8,500 for elementary and middle private schools and \$13,000 for private high schools. They also propose the president attempt to expand choice for military families and children enrolled in Bureau of Indian Education schools.

“Those offer major opportunities to create choices where few or none exist,” they wrote.

They also urged Trump and his administration to use the bully pulpit to prod states into expanding their own school choice policies.

“They can try different policies, and do so without exposing everyone to possible failure,” they wrote. “States also compete for residents and businesses, creating a much greater incentive to care about efficient and effective policy than Washington has.”

It’s unclear whether congressional Republicans would follow marching orders if the White House insisted on including some type of scholarship tax credit in a sweeping tax reform bill. They’ve already rebuffed the administration’s education budget proposal by nixing all of its proposed funding increases for school choice, other than a small increase for charter schools.