

# The Virginian-Pilot

## Youngkin can chart a different path for education in Virginia

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Glenn Youngkin's victory in Virginia's gubernatorial race might have been a surprise, but anger among parents of school-aged kids should not have been. Dissatisfaction with public schools has been palpable since the largely online start of the last school year, and parents have only felt more dictated to as education officials have told them to swallow mask mandates, racial equity policies and more.

When Terry McAuliffe said, "I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach," he basically handed Youngkin the election. Given this, you would expect Youngkin to be all in on school choice, which puts public education money — and therefore power — in parental hands.

You would be wrong.

Youngkin's choice proposal is anemic: create 20 new charter schools. It's not nothing — Virginia currently has only seven operating charters — but it would be, at best, the proverbial drop in the bucket.

If all 20 charters were created (and a good haggler knows you rarely get your first offer) and each enrolled the roughly 200-student average of current charters, that would only be 4,000 students. Out of about 1.4 million school-aged kids.

Further degrading the proposal, charter schools are public schools, and hence are limited in what they can do. For instance, they are in part held accountable by state standardized tests. They also

cannot be religious, though many of our most searing education disputes, such as over transgender student pronouns, directly implicate religious values.

Much more powerful than creating a handful of charters would be to expand the state's existing scholarship tax credit program, through which donors to groups that provide scholarships receive tax credits for their donations.

As of 2020, about 4,500 students attended private schools through the program. Total credits are currently capped at \$25 million, which could easily be quadrupled just to start considering that the commonwealth spends around \$7.3 billion on elementary and secondary education. Indeed, Virginians would save money with every child who switched from public to private school, with scholarships, which average about \$3,100, costing far less than the approximately \$13,200 spent per public school pupil.

Unfortunately, what Youngkin and many others appear to mean when they talk about schools responding to parents is not empowering parents to make their own decisions, but some parents getting their way in public schools. For instance, those who dislike policies informed by critical race theory getting those policies killed. But that means the schools stop responding to parents who want such policies.

That is hugely problematic, keeping public schools' dictatorial power and just changing the dictators.

Not only does this fail to empower parents as a whole, it perpetuates the wrenching, neighbor-versus-neighbor political warfare inherent to public schooling, warfare we've seen inflame school board meetings across the country. It maintains a system in which for one side to get what it wants, the other must not.

With a choice-based system, that changes. Rather than having to impose on others to get what you want, all can freely pursue what they desire. For your child to read Toni Morrison's "Beloved" in class or "Of Mice and Men" no longer means your neighbor's child is assigned it, too.

The good news is that Youngkin may be evolving on this. While he has not come out for private choice, he just placed Lindsey Burke, head of education policy at the Heritage Foundation, on his transition team. She is a supporter of private choice. And Lt. Gov.-elect Winsome Sears has at least mentioned families asking for vouchers in calling for choice.

The good news is that likely few people want empowerment to mean that they get what they desire and others do not. They simply may not have considered that there could be a better way. After all, “free” public schooling has long been the government-imposed default for the large majority of families, and they may think only in terms of how to get what they want in that system.

Now is the time to think differently. That public schooling leaves parents with little power and forces painful conflict may never have been clearer than over the last year-and-a-half. Gov.-elect Youngkin needs to see this and put choice at the center of his agenda.

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