



Surprise: President Drops by Event to Tout School Choice

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President Trump made an unexpected stop today at a White House event to promote school choice.

"I wasn't supposed to be here," he told a group of young D.C. students, "it wasn't on my schedule."

The surprise visit may make political sense though.

Dr. Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the CATO institute, observed that the administration is in the midst of building support for school choice legislation and also received "bad press" last week on a report on the nation's only federally funded voucher program in Washington, D.C.

Today's visit may counteract the negative publicity and "gin up support for school choice for whatever it is they eventually propose" said McCluskey.

The president told the school children that he's asking lawmakers to help the administration extend school choice but offered no specifics.

As reported in *The Atlantic*, the President's 2018 budget adds \$1.4 billion to school choice, including voucher programs and charter schools, along with \$250 million for a new private school-choice program.

At the same time, it cuts overall funding for the Department of Education by 13 percent.

McCluskey and other analysts expect the main legislation promoting school choice will come through tax code reform.

"There's long been an expectation that they will do some sort of tax credit for scholarships," said McCluskey. Such a bill would allow credits for those who pay tuition for their children or who give to groups that give scholarships.

The American Federation for Children (AFC), the school choice advocacy group that Education Secretary Betsy DeVos formerly led, praised the president for his commitment to school choice after the White House event, and touted the tax credit as a legislative priority.

AFC CEO John Schilling said the credit "would inspire charitable giving to state non-profits who provide scholarships to eligible children" and called it "the best way to immediately expand opportunity for children in need of more and better educational options."

The D.C. voucher program, known as the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship, has awarded scholarships to more than 6,000 children from low-income families since it began in 2004.

As the president noted, the graduation rate stands at 98 percent.

Still, there's mixed reviews on the success of the D.C. voucher. Last week the Education Department's research arm released a study that showed students in the program had lower standardized test scores than their peers outside the program.

McCluskey contends, however, that the testing measure doesn't tell the whole story.

He notes that one variable in understanding D.C. voucher schools is that D.C. public schools have seen significant increases in achievement. Also, parent and student satisfaction with the voucher program remains high.