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EDUCATION WEEK

Donald Trump Elected 45th President of the U.S.

Andrew Ujifusa

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Republican Donald Trump, whose brash campaign for the White House included strong support for school choice and sharp denunciations of current education policy, has been elected president of the United States, the Associated Press reported early Wednesday.

Trump's victory in the presidential race leaves widespread uncertainty about what's in store for public schools under the first Republican administration in eight years. Aside from school choice, Trump, a New York-based real estate developer, spent very little time talking about K-12 education during his campaign. And he has no track record to speak of or draw on for insights into what he may propose.

"We're all engaging in a lot of speculation because there hasn't been a lot of serious discussion about this, especially in the Trump campaign," said Martin R. West, an associate professor of education at Harvard University who has advised Republicans, including 2012 GOP nominee Mitt Romney and Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., on education issues.

Trump did propose a \$20 billion federal plan to dramatically expand school choice for low-income students. His plan would allow students to use federal funds to help them attend private, charter, magnet, and traditional public schools of their choice. It's also designed to leverage additional state investments in school choice of up to \$100 billion nationwide.

But otherwise, Trump has mostly dealt in sound bites with controversial issues like the Common Core State Standards, the fate of the U.S. Department of Education, and gun-free school zones.

Longtime observers and analysts said in the run-up to Election Day that because Trump's views on education are largely a black box, the role of Republicans in Congress as well as of the U.S. Secretary of Education and senior staff at the Education Department could grow under his administration.

Nat Malkus, a research fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, said it's possible that Trump will direct Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, his vice president, to be his point person on K-12, given Pence's clear conservative track record on education issues.

"I wouldn't be surprised at all if he gives Pence a lot of leeway there, to kind of define that role," Malkus said. "I could really see him trying to minimize any role [of the federal government in education]."

Pressing Issues and Staff

While education may not be a high-profile issue politically at the moment, it's not as if the Trump administration won't have anything to do on that front.

At or near the top of the K-12 to-do list is how the Trump administration handles the Every Student Succeeds Act. The Education Department under President Barack Obama is relatively close to finalizing regulations governing how states hold schools accountable, and how districts must show they are using federal money to supplement their state and local school budgets.

Republicans in Congress have been critical of both sets of proposals from the department, particularly the one governing the supplemental-money rule. In fact, 25 GOP lawmakers recently asked the department to rescind its proposal for ensuring federal funds are supplemental, on the grounds that the proposal would provide the department too much power over what should be state and local budget decisions.

A Trump-led department might decide to rescind one or both sets of those regulations that many Republicans, as well as representatives for states and districts, strongly dislike.

"That would be my hope," said Neal McCluskey, the director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "He would probably drastically reduce what the federal government does in education. In K-12, that would be sticking with the spirit, and what a lot of people would say is the letter, of ESSA."

But McCluskey added that there's also a decent chance Trump would use the federal government as leverage to promote school choice.

Much of that also depends on who Trump picks to lead his Education Department—assuming that he decides not to seek elimination or drastic cutbacks to the department, which he has sometimes said he would like to do.

In October, Carl Palladino, a school board member in Buffalo, N.Y., and a Trump surrogate on the campaign trail, said he believed that if elected, Trump would pick someone from outside the education policy world to lead the department.

Another key decision will be to decide who reviews states' proposed accountability plans for ESSA next year.

“Who are going to be his people? If he brings in a traditional right-of-center group, you can take it from there,” said Maria Ferguson, the executive director of the Center on Education Policy who worked in the Education Department under President Bill Clinton.

Ferguson suggested a traditional conservative policy agenda of expanded charter schools and other initiatives would probably get traction under a Trump administration.

“All these familiar themes that the right-of-center groups have talked about will become a version of his agenda,” she predicted, mentioning school choice and groups like the Foundation for Excellence in Education, which was founded by former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, one of Trump’s rivals for the GOP nomination. “But I don’t think it’s going to come from him.”

Earlier this year, Trump tapped Rob Goad, a staffer for Rep. Luke Messer, R-Ind., to be his education adviser, not too long before his campaign released its \$20 billion school choice plan. There are some basic similarities between Trump’s plan and Messer’s push last year to make federal Title I funds “portable” for disadvantaged students to use at both public and private schools.

And Trump’s transition team for education consists of Williamson M. Evers, a research fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, who worked at the education department under President George W. Bush, and Gerard Robinson, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a former Florida education commissioner.

Car Keys and a 12-Pack?

Much also depends on Trump’s relationships with Congress and to what extent he empowers key GOP lawmakers on education policy.

Besides ESSA, Congress has been fairly active when it comes to moving education-related legislation. In recent months, for example, the House of Representatives approved reauthorizations of the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act.

Some, but less, progress has also been made on renewing the Child Nutrition Act. And And the Higher Education Act, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, and the Head Start federal preschool program are up for reauthorization in the near future.

Trump has outlined a general plan regarding college affordability, including capping student-loan repayments at 12.5 percent of income and instituting loan forgiveness after 15 years for certain borrowers. But college affordability is a more prominent issue thanks to the recent presidential campaign. And since Congress continues to remain sharply divided along partisan lines, Trump and the Republicans likely won’t be able to simply roll ahead with all their preferences on higher education.

“You’re not doing anything legislatively without bipartisan support,” West said. “It’s not obvious to me that there is a clear Republican agenda in Congress right now with respect to K-12 education, except for trying to ensure that ESSA is implemented in a way consistent with the intent of the law of empowering states to design accountability systems as they see fit.”

Regarding Trump's school choice plan, for example, West noted that a more-limited pitch to allow students to take Title I funds, targeting disadvantaged students, to the public or private schools of their choice fell flat during negotiations to pass what ultimately became ESSA. That's a bad sign for a broader initiative like the one Trump's put out, he said. (ESSA does broaden access to grant money distributed through the federal Charter School Program.)

But uncertainty prevails, both in terms of what Trump will take an interest in and how much he will push to get education bills and initiatives over the finish line.

"With Trump, it's like giving a teenager a 12-pack and the keys to your car," said Malkus of AEI. "You just don't know what's going to happen."