

# The Washington Times

## GOP talks up school choice as good policy and good politics

By: Seth McLaughlin – May 29, 2013

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A Republican Party still reeling from the November elections is hoping that advocating for school choice can help the GOP recapture moderate voters, arguing that the issue provides a natural link between their limited-government philosophy and the average voter's desire for good local schools.

Sen. Rand Paul, a Kentucky Republican speaking to grass-roots activists in Concord last week, said the party can bolster its national image by making school choice — giving parents the ability and the funds to choose between competing public and private schools for their children — a more prominent part of its message.

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal hit a similar note two weeks earlier, saying at a fundraiser in Manchester that the issue is a political winner because it saves money and produces better results.

The national push echoes what Republican governors have been trying to do at the state level for the past decade.

In New Hampshire, the Republican-led legislature last year muscled through a tax credit to help low-income families that home-school their children or send them to private schools.

"I think there is a good momentum with school choice," said former New Hampshire House Speaker Bill O'Brien, a Republican. "It really comes down to the fact that this breaks the government school monopoly, which is killing us. I think all the candidates ought to be talking about that because the education system is failing."

School choice programs take many forms. Some Republican governors have pushed for vouchers or scholarships that allow students to afford private schools. Others have offered tax deductions or credits, or promoted home schooling or charter schools.

Mr. Jindal's home state made vouchers a major part of the school reform package in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and eventually expanded the program statewide.

But the program was set back at least temporarily this month when the Louisiana Supreme Court struck down the funding mechanism that Mr. Jindal tapped for the state's private-school tuition vouchers. The ruling said it violated the state's constitution because the money was earmarked for public education. Court challenges to funding

The American Civil Liberties Union of New Hampshire and Americans United for Separation of Church and State are leading a court challenge against New Hampshire's scholarship program, arguing that the state constitution bars taxpayer money from being diverted to fund private religious schools.

Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney supported school choice, but the issue never became a focal point of his campaign last year. Some strategists said he missed a chance to use a message that was easy to articulate.

"He truly believed that the economy would trump all," Republican strategist Ford O'Connell said. "The problem is that the economy is a dry subject and most people don't understand how it works. As such, Romney would have been better served and likely more effective to hammer home additional items like school choice, in terms of broadening his voter base rather than just sending Ann Romney up there to say: 'I love you, women!'"

Polls strongly suggest that school choice is a popular issue with voters.

The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice released a survey this month that found that 66 percent of mothers with school-age children support vouchers and 69 percent support tax-credit scholarships to be able to choose their children's schools. Low-income mothers and black parents were some of the staunchest supporters, the survey found.

A survey by the libertarian Cato Institute noted that six of the seven states that enacted tax credits for school choice programs before 2010 subsequently have voted to expand their programs. The Iowa Legislature last week overwhelmingly approved raising the cap on the state's tax credit program from \$8.75 million to \$12 million and expanded the pool of corporations eligible for tax credits when they donate to scholarship organizations.

That is one reason the Republican National Committee, in its postelection analysis, said the party shouldn't have left that arrow in its quiver in the last campaign.

"Perhaps no policy demonstrates the depth of our party's commitment to all Americans as strongly as school choice — our promise of 'equal opportunity in education' to all children regardless of color, class or origin," the RNC report said.

Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who has made education reform his focus since leaving office, said school choice sends a unifying message to voters.

"Those who embrace school choice are saying they believe every parent should be able to select the school that best fits their child, regardless of their ZIP code or salary," Mr. Bush said.

Is the issue oversold?

Democrats say Republicans are overselling the issue's appeal in places such as New Hampshire.

"This has been a state that traditionally has been strong pro-public education," said James M. Demers, co-chairman of President Obama's New Hampshire campaign. "So that may be an issue that mobilizes the more conservative wing of the Republican Party, but this is another one of those issues that doesn't play well in the general election. The independent voters, which is the biggest bloc of voters here, tend to not support that approach."

Mr. Bush, Mr. Paul and Mr. Jindal are only a few of the potential 2016 Republican presidential candidates who are embracing school choice.

Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida is pushing a proposal that would create tax breaks for individuals and corporations that send charitable contributions to scholarship-granting organizations, which provide money to eligible students who attend private elementary and secondary schools.

Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin is pushing to expand the state's school choice program by ratcheting up the amount of voucher money set aside for private and religious schools. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie has promoted tax-credit scholarships and called on the Legislature this year to set aside more money for scholarships that could be used to pay tuition at private schools or out-of-district public schools.

"There is nothing that angers me more than going into urban school settings, watching kids fail and looking at parents who say, 'I have no option, governor,'" Mr. Christie said at a town-hall event in March.