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Trump touts cherished conservative goal of school choice amid reopening battle

W. James Antle III

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President Trump wants schools to reopen as normal for in-person classroom instruction in the fall despite the pandemic, but if they don't, he has signaled he is willing to push for a major expansion in school choice in response.

“If schools do not reopen, the funding should go to parents to send their child to public, private, charter, religious, or home school of their choice. The key word being ‘choice,’” Trump told reporters at the White House last week. “If the school is closed, the money should follow the student, so the parents and families are in control of their own decisions. So we’d like the money to go to the parents of the student. This way, they can make the decision that's best for them.”

“We feel that it's very important, from the White House, to address ... money for schools and ensuring that the money for schools enables students to make school choices, like actually going to a physically open school. So, right now, that's where the discussions lie at the moment,” said White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany when describing the Trump administration's priorities for the next coronavirus spending package.

Conservatives and libertarians have long advocated per-pupil expenditures following individual students, allowing them to escape failing public school systems for other institutions subject to parental choice. Suburban Republican voters with strong public school districts have been more reluctant to support ballot initiatives aimed at securing this outcome.

Yet a big question remains as to what Trump could actually do to promote greater choice if local school districts defy his calls to reopen. The federal government is only responsible for 8.5% of K-12 education spending nationally, and as Trump himself has conceded, it is primarily a state and local issue. “We do have a national strategy, but, as you know, ultimately, it's up to the governors of the states,” Trump said. “I think most governors, many governors, want these schools to open. I would like to see the schools open, especially when you see statistics like this.”

Polls have shown a high level of public concern with reopening during the coronavirus, with an *Associated Press*-NORC Center for Public Affairs survey showing only 1 in 10 favor full reopening without any restrictions intended to combat the virus and 3 in 10 opposing reopening at all.

“Existing federal education dollars should fund the student, rather than district systems, and follow students to education options of choice that are open,” said Lindsey Burke, director of the Center for Education Policy at the conservative Heritage Foundation. “That could take the form

of policies like Title I portability, enabling existing federal funding for students in low-income districts to follow them to education options of choice, or IDEA portability allowing federal funding for students with special needs to pay for education options and services outside of their public school district."

"School choice at the federal level could also be accomplished through the creation of scholarship or education savings account options for students who are in active-duty military families, Native American students on tribal lands, or students who live in Washington, D.C. — populations where there is a constitutional, federal obligation when it comes to their education," Burke added. Trump has supported "opportunity scholarships" for low-income Washington, D.C., students to enroll in private schools, for example.

"School choice is consistent with conservative and libertarian principles, but federal choice is much less so," said Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute. "The Constitution gives Washington no authority to govern in education outside of the District of Columbia, federal installations such as military bases, and in cooperation with Native American reservations. Beyond constitutionality, many libertarians and conservatives worry about a federal choice program becoming a conduit for national regulation of private schools."

Some on the Right have even questioned why Trump is making such a big issue of public school reopening, given that the pandemic has the potential to popularize home schooling and other options. Trump has cited data showing that school is not only safe for children, who transmit the coronavirus less easily than adults but safer than keeping them at home. He also would more generally like to see the country get back to normal following the outbreak and months of lockdowns. The next coronavirus package may be key to the administration's leverage on this.

"I don't think they plan to use any existing funding, which is sent out according to preexisting formulas. The administration is trying to attach CARES Act funding to kids, but that is not new and is currently subject of much disagreement and lawsuits," said McCluskey. "I think the plan going forward is to have stipulations put on funding in the upcoming federal relief package, though I don't know how much direct input the administration will have on that."