



School Choice – Choices to Make

Listening to the President’s [State of the Union address](#) , one small sentence sandwiched between funding for child cancer research and paid family leave, caused my ears to perk up. When President Trump said, “To help support working parents, the time has come to pass school choice for Americans’ children,” it was clear that the Trump administration would push for Federal funding for school choice in this session of Congress.

This comment was followed by the introduction of school choice legislation in both the Senate, by Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), and the House of Representatives, by Representative Bradley Byrne (R-AL). Then, most recently, funding for a school choice plan was included in the [President’s budget proposal](#) to Congress.

It is not surprising that school choice funding is on the President’s agenda. [Recent polling from Education Next](#) (see questions 13, 14 and 15) indicates that there is a diverse coalition of American’s who support choice, and the support is likely to continue. A [2017 poll of Millennials](#) found that, “A majority of Millennials support charter schools, including 65% of African Americans, 61% of Asian Americans and 58% of Latinos.”

Of course, the details are important—the type of plan that one person likes may not be favored by others. In the Education Next 2018 poll the plan that seems to garner the broadest support is one in which corporations and individuals would receive dollar for dollar reductions in their Federal taxes for donating to a scholarship fund that would help low-income parents send their children to private schools. In the Education Next poll (Question 14) this plan was supported by 57% of Democrats, 57% of Republicans, 68% of Hispanics, and 61% of Blacks.

Again, it is no surprise that the President’s plan, and The Cruz/Byrne bills, all look something like the plan that had the broadest support in the polling.

The President’s budget and the Cruz/Byrne bills all propose a Federal tax credit that would give corporations and individuals a dollar for dollar reduction in their Federal taxes for contributions to private school scholarship funds that are established by individual states. Each state that wanted to participate would create and administer their own scholarship fund from the

anticipated contributions. The total amount of the Federal tax credit would be capped at a total of \$5 billion per year across the nation. In essence, wealthy donors and corporations could pay some of their Federal taxes by contributing to state created voucher programs.

Some might consider this to be a “shell game,” because while it appears that private individuals and corporations are supporting these funds with \$5 billion, the Federal Government would be reimbursing these individuals and corporations through the Federal tax credits.

Making states responsible for creating the scholarships using contributions supported by a Federal tax credit is a new feature in funding for choice plans. There are two reasons why the Trump administration included this state feature: first, to let each state create the plan that is most suitable for them; and second, to calm fears that a Federal school choice program would be used to regulate private schools.

So, has the Trump administration stumbled across a formulation for school choice that will receive bipartisan support and sail through Congress? Well, maybe not. Opposition is already mounting from two sources.

First, some conservative groups—notably the [Heritage Foundation](#)—have announced their opposition to the choice proposal because they believe that, even with individual states controlling the scholarships, the proposal would eventually allow the Federal government to regulate private schools, destroying the greatest strength of private schools—freedom from government intrusion. This is a valid concern as it would only take a slight change in the legislation to require that state scholarship funds supported by the Federal tax credit could only support private schools with certain features—perhaps ones that use no Child Left Behind curriculum and testing.

Second, the teacher unions have also announced their standard opposition based on the concern that such proposals could reduce support for public education. They are certain to exert a strong lobbying effort against any choice bill in Congress. But not all teachers would agree with the unions. The Education Next polling reveals that looking at all teachers—both union and non-union—support for the choice proposal narrowly edges out those opposed to it by 46% to 44%.

As Christian teachers, where should we stand on this very divided issue? Each of us are likely to come down in a different place based on what we think is best for the students we are called to teach.

Personally, for many years I opposed all forms of school privatization because I believed that supporting private schools meant supporting divisions in our culture. Traditionally the public schools have been an important place for us to learn to get along with each other and for recent immigrants to assimilate into a new culture. However, as I have watched the success of charter schools and other private schools in the inner cities compared to dismal results from inner city public schools, my opinion has been shifting.

This [article by Walter Williams](#) makes some important points. Williams notes that despite decades of effort public schools are failing vast numbers of minority students, and that charter schools with very specific, rigorous programs, like Success Academies and KIPP Academies,

do a significantly better job for families who send their children to these schools. Williams acknowledges that “selection bias” is a factor in the success of these schools. They only accept children whose parents work very hard to get their children admitted, demonstrating greater child engagement than other parents. But he dismisses traditional liberals who, “believe integration is a necessary condition for black academic excellence” by rejecting, “the proposition that no black youngsters should be saved from educational rot until all can be saved.”

One thing that we can be sure of is that the students with the least support at home are not going away. As Jesus told us, “You always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them” (Mark 14:7). I am also confident that while each of us are called to serve in different ways, there will always be Christians who are called to work with disadvantaged students. As you “let your light shine” before the students you serve, “they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Please share your thoughts on this column that you would like other readers to see by entering them in the form below. Personal comments can be sent to JMitchell@ceai.org. John Mitchell is the Washington, DC Area Director for the Christian Educators Association.

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