



Protecting Public Education Amid the High-Stakes School Choice Debate

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The 2024 US election has reignited the national debate on school choice, an issue poised to dominate education policy-related discussions during president [Donald Trump's second term](#). School choice encompasses a wide-array of policies - vouchers, Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), tax-credit scholarships, and charter schools. These policies enable families to direct public education funds towards alternatives to traditional public schools. With a renewed push for universal private school choice, advocates of school choice policies see an opportunity for sweeping reforms.

While proponents argue that expanding school choice strengthens [parental rights and educational freedom](#), there are significant concerns about its long-term impact. Without safeguards, these policies risk exacerbating inequities, draining resources from public schools, and undermining educational quality. To balance choice with equity, policymakers should also focus on strengthening public schools, ensuring transparency in privately managed education programs, and implementing accountability measures for all publicly funded education providers.

Parental Rights and Ideological Battles

President Trump and his allies frame school choice as a [cornerstone of parental rights](#), a theme amplified by conservative backlash against public school curricula they perceive as politically biased. The [push for universal vouchers](#) aligns with broader efforts to curtail teaching on topics like race, gender, and equity - issues that have become the topic of discussion these days nationwide.

However, the emphasis on parental choice and privatization may come at a societal cost. Critics like Carol Burris, executive director of the [Network for Public Education](#), argue that Milton Friedman's vision for universal school choice is rooted in [ideological opposition to government oversight](#), rather than evidence-based improvements in student outcomes. "School choice in the form of charters and vouchers has not delivered on any of [Friedman's] promises; in fact, all evidence shows they have made segregation worse," Burris told *Salon*.

To ensure that school choice policies serve all students equitably, it is critical for lawmakers to consider stronger oversight mechanisms, require transparency in curriculum and admissions policies, and prevent discriminatory practices in privately managed schools receiving public funds.

The School Choice Movement's Renewed Momentum

Trump's [first term saw limited success](#) on this front, but with Congress now in his favor, political and stakeholder advocates of school choice see an unprecedented opportunity to expand these initiatives nationally. Supporters argue that school choice empowers parents to make decisions that best suit their children's needs, particularly in areas where public schools are underperforming. Florida and Arizona, ranked highest by the [Heritage Foundation's Education Freedom Report Card](#), exemplify this vision. These states have embraced expansive ESA programs, allowing families to use public funds for private tuition, tutoring, and even extracurricular activities. For proponents, this signals a shift toward a more flexible, market-driven approach to education.

Yet even as the movement gains traction, it faces substantial resistance from unexpected corners. In [rural areas](#), where public schools are often the only viable option for students, some conservatives question the practicality of diverting funds to private alternatives. Some states like Kentucky and Nebraska recently [rejected measures to expand public funding](#) for private education, signaling that school choice is far from a settled issue - even within President Trump's base.

For school choice initiatives to be viable in the long term, it seems that they must be paired with policies that ensure equitable resource distribution and accountability, preventing the erosion of public education.

What is at Stake for Public Education?

Expanding school choice programs, such as vouchers and Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), risks draining critical resources from public schools, leaving them underfunded and less equipped to serve the majority of students. [Kentucky's Supreme Court decision](#) to strike down the Education Opportunity Account Act as unconstitutional underscores these concerns. The court ruled that the program, which allowed donors to receive tax credits for supporting private school tuition, violated the state constitution by undermining the requirement for a system of free public education. This decision reinforces the argument that funding two parallel systems - public and private - on taxpayer dollars is unsustainable and violates constitutional commitments to equitable public education.

This tension is particularly evident in states like Tennessee, where [Gov. Bill Lee recently signed the Education Freedom Act of 2025](#) into law, establishing the first new educational choice program of the year. The [newly enacted ESA program will allocate up to \\$7,000 per student in public funds to private schools statewide](#), expanding beyond its previous focus on Memphis and Nashville. While proponents argue that the program empowers families by providing universal eligibility, local governments and education advocates raise concerns that such initiatives may still disproportionately benefit certain students while diverting resources from already underfunded public schools, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas.

Beyond funding, there are concerns about the accountability of for-profit education models. [Charter Schools USA](#), a for-profit company managing public charters in multiple states, has faced [allegations of mismanagement, including failure to provide required special education services](#). These issues highlight the need for stronger oversight and accountability mechanisms to ensure all education providers meet their obligations and serve students equitably.

The Road Ahead for School Choice

The resurgence of school choice under President Trump's administration represents a significant moment for American education. Proponents see an opportunity to dismantle what they view as a monopolistic public school system in favor of competition and innovation. Opponents, however, view these policies as an existential threat to public education and a step backward in the fight for equity and access. This debate is emblematic of deeper divides in how Americans envision the purpose of education: Is it a public good, to be equitably funded and universally accessible? Or is it a private commodity, to be shaped by market forces and individual preferences?

Instead of focusing solely on expanding voucher and ESA programs, policymakers should also consider:

- **Strengthening Public Education:** Ensuring that all students, regardless of income or location, receive a high-quality education is a fundamental societal responsibility. Rather than diverting funds to private institutions, increasing investments in teacher support, student services, and infrastructure could provide more widespread benefits.
- **Ensuring Accountability:** All publicly funded education providers, including charter and private schools, should be held to the same transparency and accountability standards to prevent fraud, mismanagement, and discriminatory practices.
- **Balancing Choice with Equity:** If school choice policies continue to expand, they should be designed with safeguards to prevent exacerbating segregation and economic inequality, ensuring that all students have equitable access to quality education.

As Trump and Congress push forward with their agenda, the stakes for public schools - and the students they serve - could not be higher. Policymakers must weigh the benefits of choice against the broader consequences for a nation that relies on public education as a cornerstone of democracy. For now, the battle lines are drawn, and the future of American education hangs in the balance