

16 for 2016:

16 Education Policy Ideas for the Next President

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Parent Powered Schools

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We know that expanding school choice and empowering parents can be key to improving student achievement. We understand that parents are clamoring for more and greater varieties of school options and for more power over the education of their children. And it is clear that the federal government has, and continues to play, a prominent role in expanding choice and parent power, encompassing all options from homeschooling to traditional public schools.

Yet the federal government can do much more to help parents regardless of where their children are schooled.

Both out of concern over the quality of schools serving their communities and a desire for schools that reflect their values, families around the country are using school choice options to give their kids a chance at a better education. Some 2.7 million children were enrolled in charter schools in the 2014–15 school year, a 49 percent increase from five years earlier.⁹⁷ Another 1.8 million children were homeschooled in 2012–13, a 17 percent increase from five years earlier.⁹⁸ And 308,000 children were enrolled in 39 school voucher and tax credit scholarship programs in 2013–14, a 54 percent increase over 2010–11.⁹⁹

Parents are clearly onto something. Charter schools in 41 urban communities, on average, increased student achievement compared to traditional public schools by 40 additional days in math and 28 additional days in reading, according to research from Stanford University’s Center for Research on Educational Outcomes.¹⁰⁰ In addition, students receiving vouchers from the District of Columbia’s Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) graduated at rates 21 percent higher than peers in traditional public schools.¹⁰¹

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Meanwhile parents are demonstrating a desire for a more active role in their children’s education—and are dissatisfied with the unresponsive governance structures of traditional districts. Parents in California districts such as Adelanto Elementary School District and Los Angeles Unified used the state’s “parent trigger law” to take over and turn around low-performing schools and as leverage to negotiate with districts for additional resources and autonomy. Homeschooling parents have taken a different approach, forming cooperatives for families to share resources, collaborating to provide instruction in specific areas, and even forming their own sports teams. Even parents who opt their children out of annual standardized testing, who many reformers view with disdain because of equity concerns, are basically saying they want more power and choice.

Traditionally the federal government has played a part in expanding choice and empowerment. For example, following enactment of the Race to the Top grant program under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (2009), over 1,365 new charter schools opened between 2010-11 and 2014-15.¹⁰² Democrats and Republicans alike credit President Clinton for sparking an expansion of public charter schools during the 1990s through a combination of federal policy, dollars, and the White House bully pulpit.

Yet big gaps in the federal government's role remain.

Through the Charter Schools Program (CSP), the federal government provided \$239.2 million in 2014-15 to launch new or expanded charter schools either through state education agencies or established charter programs. However, none of CSP's grant programs support the efforts of families and other community groups to launch independent charters or other kinds of "autonomous public schools" in their communities, even though federal law allows for it. State education agencies aren't required to set aside for that purpose even one dollar of the \$154 million received for funding new charter school openings. Changes implemented by the Obama administration five years ago to ensure the creation and expansion of high-quality charters, which are now codified in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), also ensure that already well-resourced existing charter management organizations (CMOs) receive the bulk of CSP funding.

As a result, families and community-based groups, which usually have no established track record to prove their ability to succeed in launching schools and lack resources to support their success, are increasingly left out. They are unable to form and control charters that serve the particular needs of their children, or even to seek out the technical assistance needed to successfully launch such schools. This means that parents seeking to flee their traditional public schools are limited to CMO-operated charters, where they may have few opportunities to shape the schools' direction.

Race to the Top played a prominent role in parent empowerment, spurring the passage of parent trigger laws in California and six other states. But it never specifically required states seeking funds to pass parent trigger laws, enact other legislation to empower parents, or strengthen existing family engagement policies. So few states addressed parent empowerment. Meanwhile districts failed to properly utilize Title I's one-percent set-aside for family engagement activities, effectively discouraging parents and family engagement groups from playing strong roles in school decision-making.

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One reason the federal government hasn't done more to advance choice and parent power is that policymakers have failed to understand that the paradigm of education has shifted from a collection of monopolistic school districts to an array of options. Because of these changes, families, regardless of whether their children are homeschooled or in public schools, want to be more than passive players in education. Families want to be on equal footing with the district bureaucracies, teachers' unions, and state policymakers who were long in charge of shaping education.

The next administration can build on existing programs to genuinely empower parents and foster the creation of more diverse schooling options. At the heart of this effort is a comprehensive approach to choice that acknowledges that all families should have power over their children's education regardless of educational setting.

One avenue to address this is through the existing CSP, which funds charter and other independent schools. The next administration should create a Parent-Run School Grant Program. The program could provide three-year planning and development grants of at least \$608,000 (or the average size of a three-year grant currently given to charters under the CSP) to coalitions of families and community groups with sound business plans to launch (and get technical assistance in starting) new charters or other forms of independent public schools. If at least 20 Parent-Run School Grants are given, that would be \$12.2 million for starting new schools, funded either from new funds or by diverting a portion from existing sources.

Another step could require state education agencies (SEAs) receiving CSP funding to set aside at least 10 percent to assist families and community groups in launching new charters. These dollars would be substantial. During 2014-15, for instance, just 10 state education agencies shared in the \$125.1 million in new funding for charter school startup grants; a 10 percent set-aside would have meant \$12.5 million for launching new family- and community-led charters. As with other set-asides, the biggest challenge will be bureaucratic inertia. But the president can get SEAs to act by making effective implementation of the set-aside a condition for a CSP grant—and bar SEAs from future participation in CSP if those requirements aren't met.

The next president can also work with Congress to pass a law creating an "educational empowerment zone" program similar to enterprise and empowerment zones originated by former congressman Jack Kemp in the 1980s or the Promise Neighborhoods initiative launched by the Obama administration. In these zones, which can be implemented in rural as well as urban communities, a portion of Title I funding that would otherwise go to districts can be used to launch new community-based schools run by families, community groups, and faith-based organizations. Family- and community-controlled charters receiving startup funds from CSP could immediately take advantage of those additional dollars. So could homeschool cooperatives, especially those which have

already been certified by state departments of education, as well as charter schools that provide online and distance learning programs to homeschooling parents, as in California and a few other states.

The federal government could use Washington, D.C.'s Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) as a vehicle for an educational empowerment zone. A new grant program within OSP could be created to provide parent-, community-, and faith-based groups with grants to build capacity for launching new schools. As with the Parent-Run School Grant, these groups could receive funding for three years as they launch new schools in D.C. to serve low-income students, including those already receiving OSP vouchers.

Finally, the president can work with Congress to amend ESSA for the creation of a grant program funded by the one-percent Title I set-aside. Unlike the current approach, districts would no longer be in charge of deciding how those funds are spent. Instead, parent groups and family engagement advocates would directly access those funds, either through educational empowerment zones or through community foundations selected by state education agencies. Funds could be used to facilitate parent trigger petitions, or support negotiations with districts and autonomous public schools in matters such as placement of teachers or even determining whether school attendance can be open enrollment or restricted to school zones. This way, these funds enable families to take their proper roles in school decision-making.

The next president has several opportunities and tools under federal law to expand choice and parent power. In doing so, the next administration can help federal and state governments embrace a new vision of the role of families in education that is already becoming reality.