

The Values-Based Case for School Choice Is Also the Winning Case

By Lindsey M. Burke and Jay P. Greene

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Key Points

- In their quest for broad support for school choice, proponents have conceded to Democrats' policy demands, including limited student eligibility and heavy-handed regulations, ultimately weakening the options available to families.
- Yet, these concessions haven't won Democratic policymakers' support and may have alienated Republican policymakers.
- School choice supporters, therefore, should not be afraid to make what is likely our most compelling case: that education freedom is fundamentally about enabling parents to choose learning environments that align with their values.
- For long-term success, school choice supporters must make the values-based case for school choice, pursue programs that are open to every child, and allow parents to determine what constitutes quality and accountability.

Historically, school choice proponents have invoked arguments that appeal to Democratic policymakers to make their case for choice, assuming that Republican support for education freedom was a given and such appeals would grow support for the cause. Yet in their quest for broader support, choice proponents have conceded to Democrats' policy demands that ultimately weaken the options available to families: limited student eligibility, heavy-handed standardized tests and regulations, caps on scholarship amounts and student participation, and admissions regulations.

Not only has that approach weakened many school choice programs, but it doesn't appear to have actually won Democratic policymakers' support. It may have even alienated Republican policymakers who were on the fence about supporting school choice.

These are empirical questions that Jay Greene and James Paul recently tested to understand whether, historically, Democratic legislators have provided important vote support for private school choice programs or whether Republican lawmakers would have been better served forgoing appeals to their colleagues across the aisle. As they found,

Of 70 votes held on final passage for private school choice legislation, there were only three instances when Republicans needed any Democratic votes to exceed the 50 percent threshold (Louisiana in both chambers in 2008 and the Utah Senate in 2020).¹

Their report revealed that on the rare occasions that choice proposals tailored to appeal to the left have picked up a few votes, those votes virtually never made a difference in whether the measures passed.

Not only have Democratic appeals produced virtually no legislative victories, but the magnitude of partisan difference in support for school choice is truly remarkable. For example, in state senate bodies across the country, 24 percent of Democratic caucuses supported choice proposals, a figure that rose to 88 percent for Republican caucuses. In state houses, just 17 percent of Democratic caucuses provided votes in favor of school choice proposals, compared to 85 percent of Republican caucuses.

Any Democratic support has been for modest or heavily regulated programs, such as the voucher program in Louisiana. The Louisiana voucher program suffers under a mountain of regulations that has discouraged private schools from participating, so much so that only one-third of the state's private schools will accept the vouchers.

What does this all mean for private school choice proponents? It means supporters should not be afraid to make what is likely our most compelling case: that education freedom is fundamentally about enabling parents to choose learning environments that align with their values. And in a day and age when many parents are supremely unhappy with the values public schools are disseminating—such as transgender ideology and critical race theory—choice proponents should embrace and be vocal about school choice allowing families an escape hatch from government schools pushing an agenda that runs counter to their values.

In other words, choice proponents should be unafraid to appeal to Republicans. Although that's certainly been the audience for the economic appeal since Milton Friedman penned "The Role of Government in Education" in 1955,² proponents have not made the *cultural* case for choice to the Republican base, for fear of losing Democratic legislative allies, who, it turns out, weren't really there to begin with. In so doing, they have avoided appealing to the reasons that could galvanize Republicans to make choice a priority issue—the kitchen table issues that are driving dinner conversations, such as critical race theory, protections for female sports, school closures, and mask mandates.³

Instead, proponents have focused on a social justice appeal, a worthy call to make sure those who are most harmed by government-assigned and -delivered schooling—children from low-income

families and those with special needs—are the immediate beneficiaries.

Yet here, too, the strategy needs to be reconsidered. Constituencies such as students from low-income families and children with special needs benefit from universal school choice as much, if not more so, than from targeted and means-tested programs that have smaller and less powerful bases of support and are thus politically vulnerable. All families, including disadvantaged ones, have much to gain from policymakers pursuing universal choice programs, rather than small, targeted options.

To be sure, there has been critical support for school choice from Democrats over the years. Milwaukee Democrat Annette Polly Williams championed the first modern-day school voucher program in America. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) fought against her colleagues to save the Washington, DC, voucher program. But those are the exceptions, rather than the rule. Broadly speaking, Democratic legislator support has been lacking or nonexistent.

In addition to appealing at a cultural level to families and pursuing school choice programs that are universally available to all children, policymakers should avoid heavy-handed regulations around testing and accreditation. Certain K-12 accrediting bodies have been captured by "woke" ideology, homogenizing their member schools around critical race theory.⁴ To avoid this problem and allow genuine diversity of school type to flourish, policymakers should allow any private school, not just those ordained by bureaucratic accrediting agencies, to participate in private school choice programs.

And they should not require private schools to take the same tests as the public schools from which they're trying to differentiate themselves take. Such requirements are seen by school leaders as driving curriculum decisions and, along with open-admissions requirements, are some of the primary factors leading high-quality private schools to decline participation in school choice programs.⁵ Regulations ostensibly perpetuated in the name of "accountability" have discouraged participation of high-quality schools, limited choices for families, and failed to grow legislative support for school choice.⁶

Instead of embracing Democrats' policy preferences—an approach that has not led to

actual support from Democratic policymakers at any rate—proponents of school choice should adopt policies that maximize education freedom.

They need to make the values-based case for school choice, pursue programs that are open to

every child, and allow parents to determine what constitutes quality and accountability. Promoting such policies produces more of what we want while improving the prospects for widespread school choice becoming a reality.

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Notes

1. Jay P. Greene and James D. Paul, “Does School Choice Need Bipartisan Support? An Empirical Analysis of the Legislative Records,” American Enterprise Institute, September 22, 2021, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/does-school-choice-need-bipartisan-support-an-empirical-analysis-of-the-legislative-record/>.
2. Milton Friedman, “The Role of Government in Education,” in *Economics and the Public Interest*, ed. Robert A. Solo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955), <http://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/330T/350kPEEFriedmanRoleOfGovttable.pdf>.
3. Emilie Kao and Jared Eckert, “Corporations Versus Parents,” Heritage Foundation, July 1, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/gender/commentary/corporations-versus-parents>.
4. Aaron Sibarium, “Why Private Schools Have Gone Woke,” Washington Free Beacon, July 28, 2021, <https://freebeacon.com/culture/why-private-schools-have-gone-woke/>.
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6. Corey DeAngelis, Lindsey M. Burke, and Patrick J. Wolf, “The Effects of Regulations on Private School Choice Program Participation: Experimental Evidence from Florida” (working paper, University of Arkansas, Department of Education Reform, Fayetteville, AR, October 26, 2018), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3273428.

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