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School Choice Is Here to Stay

Since the 2010 elections, the teachers union backlash has been stopped in its tracks.

By [RICHARD KOMER](#)

The 2010 elections had many obvious effects, but one of the lesser-known is that they revived the school-choice movement in a big way. Although many education writers had assumed the movement was dead, there have been far more efforts to pass school-choice programs this year than ever and, more importantly, the success rate has gone up too.

This reflects the political nature of school choice, which has in modern times been promoted primarily by Republicans. Increasingly, however, Democrats, particularly minority Democrats, have begun bucking the wishes of the national teachers unions, which oppose school choice in any form.

School choice has even broken into the national consciousness with the success of such documentaries as "The Lottery" and "Waiting for 'Superman.'" These focused on parents' efforts to get their children into charter schools, which are public schools operated independently of their local school districts—and, not coincidentally, without teacher union involvement.

From the perspective of status quo supporters, charter schools are the least threatening form of school choice, because they remain public schools, meaning they cannot charge tuition and their admissions practices typically are controlled by lottery. This year has seen dramatic increases in interest in charter schools, as an alternative to regular public schools. Even the Obama administration got into the act, by making the removal of existing caps on the number of charter schools a component of states' applications for federal "Race to the Top" funds.

More threatening to the status quo are scholarship programs that allow parents to choose private schools for their children, with the scholarships either funded by the states or generated by offering individuals and corporations tax credits for donations to privately operated scholarship funds.

Although scholarship programs like federal Pell Grants, the G.I. Bill and similar state programs are common at the postsecondary level, so far similar programs have rarely been enacted for K-12 education, where monopolistic public-school systems are the norm. After the Democrats' success in the 2008 elections, the newly emboldened allies of the teachers unions launched attacks on several of the existing programs.

For example, the U.S. Congress and the Obama administration doomed the only federal K-12 program, the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program, to a slow and lingering death in 2009 by refusing to allow the enrollment of any new students. This despite the program's success, proven by a federal study, and local political support (the salient exception being D.C.'s Congressional delegate, Eleanor Holmes Norton).

In 2009 in Wisconsin, the newly elected Democratic General Assembly joined with then Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle to reduce per capita funding for the nation's first modern scholarship program, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, and to impose burdensome

new regulations to discourage continued participation by the private schools. In Pennsylvania, before leaving office in January Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell pushed through a substantial reduction in corporate tax credits available for donations to that state's Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC), causing a reduction in the number of scholarships awarded to fewer than 39,000 from over 45,000, and driving many students back into the public schools.

Thanks to the 2010 elections, however, many of these antichoice efforts have been reversed. Due to the leadership of House Speaker John Boehner, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has been reauthorized and is expanding again. Gov. Scott Walker and the Wisconsin legislature have expanded the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program to a second city, Racine, and removed the cap on the number of Milwaukee students who can receive scholarships.

Although Pennsylvania failed to pass a new scholarship bill to help support school choice, Indiana passed what could become the largest such program in the nation, offering private-school scholarships to qualifying families statewide. Oklahoma passed a statewide tax-credit scholarship program, and Arizona enacted a new program called Empowerment Savings Accounts for special-education students. Although most of these K-12 programs are for poor children in the public-school system, even a relatively affluent school district in Colorado has created a pilot program for 500 students to attend the private schools of their choice.

The teachers unions and their allies have sought to kill several of these new school-choice initiatives already by challenging them in the courts. But any legal defeats will only motivate renewed effort on the part of school-choice advocates. The recent history of the movement shows that despite temporary setbacks, school choice is now here to stay.

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