

# Trump's voucher plan and the right-wing campaign to destroy public education

## Part one

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President Trump's budget proposal released Thursday cuts \$9.2 billion from Department of Education funding. But there is one funding boost, the only increase in funding for domestic social programs in the entire Trump budget: a \$1.4 billion increase for "school choice" programs. This includes \$1 billion for the promotion of school vouchers, where families are given a set amount of money, which they can spend on private, charter, religious or even online schools.

Trump proposed \$20 billion for school vouchers during his campaign last fall. He did not present any details except to say the funds would come from existing federal dollars spent on education. During his inaugural address, Trump denounced the public school system, saying it was "an education system, flushed with cash" that "leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge."

The president is determined to accelerate the decades-long campaign, pursued by Democratic and Republican administrations alike, to dismantle public education and funnel even more money into the hands of private business interests. In choosing billionaire Betsy DeVos for secretary of education, Trump has selected someone with a clear record of seeking to destroy public education.

The United States government is in the process of turning back the clock for public education. CEOs of the largest corporations, the Democrats and Republicans, and the courts all agree that society does not have an obligation to provide all students with a high-quality education.

The mantra of "school choice" means that the capitalist market should determine how—and whether—students get educated. Parents, as "consumers," will have a choice as to where they send their children to be educated and evaluate what they bought. If they're not happy with the school giving the education they purchased, they can look for another one, as though they were buying a pair of shoes. And of course, just as when people shop, those who are wealthier can afford better products, in this case, schools. The working class and poor will not be able to afford quality education.

While private schools choose what students to admit and keep enrolled, public schools are legally bound to serve all children, including special education, English as a Second Language (ESL) and low-income students. The purpose of vouchers is to starve the public schools of desperately needed resources to finance private and parochial schools.

Trump says he plans to take the \$20 billion for vouchers from already existing funds. Will the federal government end Pell Grants to low-income students to go to college (\$22 billion in 2016)? Will it cut

Title I state grants (\$14.9 billion) that help improve learning of low-income elementary and secondary students and provide them with school lunches? Will special education state grants (\$11.9 billion) be hit, or Head Start (\$9.2 billion), which is technically funded by the Department of Health and Human Services and provides preschool and other family health services to low-income families?

There are many other federal grants to states that may be cut, including funds for School Improvement, Striving Readers, Math and Science Partnerships, and Rural Education.

Currently, public school funding comes from the federal government (10 percent), local government (45 percent, mostly through property taxes) and state government (45 percent). Much of federal funding has been for programs to assist low-income or disabled students. When these funds are ended, it will devastate whole working class communities.

As to state funding, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities notes, "Most states provide less support per student for elementary and secondary schools—in some cases, much less—than before the Great Recession."

But far from increasing funds to public schools, vouchers will destroy them. States have been implementing voucher programs since the early 1990s, starting with the first Bush administration and continuing with Clinton, Bush and Obama. All these administrations passed legislation on public education used to undermine public schools.

### State voucher programs

Today, 27 states and Washington, D.C., have some sort of voucher program, and some have more than one type, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. The vouchers are also called Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), Tax-Credit Scholarships, Individual Tax Credits and Individual Tax Deductions.

- Fourteen states and Washington, D.C., have vouchers that give private schools state funding to pay tuition for students, primarily those who are low-income, have special needs or attend so-called poor-performing schools.

- Seventeen states, including Indiana and Florida, have tax credit

scholarship programs. A nonprofit scholarship-granting organization is formed to collect donations from individuals and/or corporations, who then get a tax credit; the nonprofit gives private school scholarships to eligible students.

- Eight states give tax credits or deductions to parents who send their kids to private schools, according to EdChoice. In Indiana and Louisiana, families can deduct tuition on their taxes, while Illinois and Iowa let parents claim a tax credit for their children's private school tuition.

- In five states, including Arizona and Mississippi, education savings accounts let parents choose how to spend the state's per-pupil allotment for their child's education—whether it's putting them in private school or paying for tutoring.

### Vouchers in Milwaukee

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program is America's longest-running private school voucher program, begun in 1990. About 28,200 Milwaukee students now use vouchers to attend private schools. A big spike in attendance occurred in 1998, when the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that families could use their state vouchers at religious schools.

The program has shifted public spending on education in the city. Milwaukee Public Schools will see a \$52.1 million loss this school year to pay for its share of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. By 2014, it was expected the total amount of public money spent on vouchers in Milwaukee would surpass \$1.7 billion.

Public school enrollment has declined and a fifth of the students who remain are classified as having disabilities, from learning to emotional to physical. Forty-one percent of all private schools that participated in the Milwaukee private school voucher program between 1991 and 2015 have closed.

Milwaukee Public Radio aired a series with many interviews on the voucher program's 25th anniversary. Milwaukee School Board member Larry Miller, who has been involved with the district for the voucher program's entire history, said, "It's transformed the landscape in the sense of it becoming a free-market competition. This program, in my opinion, started as a program for low-income students and has turned into a movement now to dismantle public education. ... I feel that the results that we're seeing now are the results of a failed experiment."

Barbara Miner, who wrote *Lessons from the Heartland*, about the history of education in Milwaukee, is a leading critic of the voucher program, saying it blurs the separation of church and state and leaves Milwaukee Public Schools facing the highest hurdles. "Private schools operate by completely different rules than public schools," she told Milwaukee Public Radio. "They do not have to follow the federal special education law. They do not have to provide bilingual education," Miner said. "They can kick kids out and there's no constitutional right to free speech or due process."

Alan Borsuk, a senior fellow at Marquette Law School and long-time education reporter, reviewed several sets of studies. He was

asked, what have the scores shown since 2010? He responded, "The notion that the voucher program would lead to a major step forward for all students in the City of Milwaukee, unfortunately, has not been true."

The *New York Times* recently reviewed research assessing student progress in voucher programs compared to public schools. In 2015, researchers published their assessment of the Indiana voucher program, which involved tens of thousands of students under Mike Pence, then the state's governor. "In mathematics," they found, "voucher students who transfer to private schools experienced significant losses in achievement. They also saw no improvement in reading."

### More negative results

Researchers found similar results when they studied Louisiana's voucher program and released the results in February 2016. "Students in the program were predominantly black and from low-income families. They came from public schools that had received poor ratings from the state department of education, based on test scores. For private schools receiving more applicants than they could enroll, the law required that they admit students via lottery, which allowed the researchers to compare lottery winners with those who stayed in public school. They found large negative results in both reading and math."

Martin West, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, calls the negative effects in Louisiana "as large as any I've seen in the literature—not just compared with other voucher studies, but in the history of American education research."

In June, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative think tank, released a third voucher study financed by the pro-voucher Walton Family Foundation. It focused on a large voucher program in Ohio. "Students who use vouchers to attend private schools have fared worse academically compared to their closely matched peers attending public schools," the researchers wrote.

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