

and learning new material. Until we reach the day when intrinsic motivation is enough to get most kids and teenagers to prioritize their schoolwork (in other words, never), or when we've transitioned to a system focused on mastery, we're going to need grades to get kids to put in the necessary effort (see "The Case for Holding Students Accountable," *feature*, Spring 2018).

5. Diploma Devaluation

Finally, let us never again decide to graduate tens of thousands of students from high school regardless of whether they mastered learning expectations or not. A cynic might say that high schools and school systems have been doing that for years, and in some parts of the country, that is probably true. But before the pandemic, in about 20 states, students were expected to pass some sort of exit exam or end-of-course exam to graduate (though that number has been trending down). And in the others, students had to pass a certain number of courses in order to earn that diploma.

States canceled those examination mandates in 2020 and 2021, for obvious reasons. But school districts waved the white flag as well, patting themselves on the back for graduating kids regardless of whether the students had even come close to meeting standards. In Chicago Public Schools, for example, officials celebrated a record-high graduation rate after easing graduation requirements and shifting to a pass/incomplete grading system. It was essentially impossible for students to fail.

To be sure, helping more students graduate high school is an urgent goal. But it also urgently important to make sure they graduate well prepared for what's ahead. It does students little good to pass them along and give out diplomas without ensuring the kids can read, write, and do math at an accomplished high-school level. Consider Miami-Dade County Public Schools, where a recent review of high-school achievement found a majority of students failed state tests in English, math, and science, despite the district's graduation rate of 85 percent.

Let's return to common sense: if a high-school diploma does not reliably guarantee a minimum base of knowledge and skills, then we have created a policy that punishes graduates who earned their diplomas but now have no way to signify to employers that they achieved something worth paying attention to. We are also signifying to students who have not fully earned their diplomas that they are ready for life after high school, and they are not.

It's become a cliché to say that, post-pandemic, American schools shouldn't try to go back to normal. That's true in many respects. But in some cases, back to normal is exactly where we need to go—the sooner, the better.

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SCHOOL LIFE

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The other side of that coin is that choice is available in cities more than anywhere else. And the demand is greater among minority families than any other families, in our polling. Why are Democrats so solidly against giving opportunities, especially to low-income students and other students who are attending schools that aren't performing?

I would argue that that's probably a reflection of their allegiance to the unions and the union power that has aligned with the Democratic Party.

Betsy DeVos, the U.S. secretary of education under President Trump, was severely criticized during her four years in office. Critics said she was a school-choice advocate and didn't support the public schools—but maybe she deserves more credit. Do you think she created more interest in school choice by her constant advocacy?

I've known Betsy DeVos a long time, and I have a great deal of respect for her. Betsy is willing to put her money behind what she believes in. It's easy for people to advocate spending other people's money on a program, but when you put your

own money behind it, I think it really shows your level of commitment. I think Betsy was criticized unfairly and that her focus was on uplifting all kids, trying to serve those kids who are most in need, and looking at urban centers where a lot of kids are struggling, failing, and dropping out of school. If school choice helps uplift them, then why not? I think that's where Betsy was. She was committed to making sure that all students have the opportunity for a great teacher, a great school, and ultimately for success.

So, what do you see as the path forward? What's the next step in school choice?

I think you're going to find Covid has changed some of this—that education really needs to be more adaptable and more personalized. Education savings accounts give parents the ability to seek that personalization. Long-term, maybe it makes sense to increase the opportunities afforded by ESAs, because that would give families more options for customizing their children's education in the future.

This is an edited excerpt from an Education Exchange podcast, which can be heard at educationnext.org.

“When Choice Really Works, It Lifts Up Everyone”

State Rep. Robert Behning on Indiana’s voucher program

E *EDUCATION NEXT* senior editor Paul Peterson spoke with Robert Behning, chair of the house education committee in Indiana, about recently enacted legislation expanding the Indiana School Choice Scholarship program.

Paul Peterson: How many students are participating in this program, and how much is it expanding under the new legislation?

Robert Behning: Today about 35,000 students statewide are in the program. We made dramatic changes this year, though. The first voucher bill in Indiana, in 2011, was means tested. For a family to be eligible, their income had to be no higher than [the maximum qualifying income for] free and reduced lunch, which at that time was about \$40,000 for a family of four. What we did this year is lift that cap to 300 percent of free and reduced lunch, so a family of four with an income of \$145,000 or less will now have access to school-choice scholarships.

Now Democrats in Indiana are complaining that this is too much, that families that make \$145,000 a year don’t need the money to send their children to a private school, and that this initiative is just helping the rich at the expense of the poor. How do you respond to that?

That point came up in some of the debates. One of the things I reflected back to them during those debates was that Joe Biden is now president of the United States, and he has said that if you make less than \$150,000, you are middle income, and you deserve a stimulus check. And I would argue that if the president—the president of their party, so to speak—argues that that is a middle income for Americans, then what we are doing in Indiana is implementing policy that he has advocated for. I would also argue that for choice to be successful, to have more opportunities for kids across the state, the program cannot be just in urban centers. It can’t be just for kids in poverty and failing schools. You need a robust choice environment to lift up everyone.

Are there new private schools opening up? How many private-school placements are available to students now?

We estimate that we have 12,000 to 15,000 seats available. We’ve made entry into the choice program relatively easy. A choice school can be either brick and mortar or virtual. I think we’re going to see a growth of choice schools in Indiana, now that there are more funds available. I’ve received a lot of letters and emails from individuals who have an interest in expanding

and making more options available for kids. We also created an education savings account program for special-ed students.

What’s the charter school situation in Indiana? And why was that not expanded at the same time?

We have no caps on charters, and we have multiple authorizers. [Indiana was the first] state in the union to allow the mayor of a city to authorize, and the mayor of Indianapolis is an authorizer. We have a state charter board, and we’ve allowed both public and nonpublic universities to become authorized to charter. One of the dilemmas in the charter sector has been facility funding, so we have significantly increased that funding as well.

A lot of people say, though, that this all sounds good, but how about the kids being left behind in the public schools? Aren’t you raiding the public schools of their best students? Aren’t there extra resources that these schools need that are now being lost?

As I said earlier, I think that when choice really works, it lifts up everyone. And our data have demonstrated that. Indianapolis probably has the most choice options of all the communities in our state. They have the most charters per capita, and we’ve created other options for them. We have traditional charter schools, or legacy charters, and we’ve created an option

called innovation network charters, which are charters that are located within traditional school buildings. [Both the traditional and the charter schools] have embraced competition, and academic performance overall has actually increased. When you get robust competition, you’ll find that it has uplifted everyone’s performance.

How did you get the Republican Party consolidated behind this, given that a lot of Republicans come from rural areas? I grew up in a small town, and I remember that everybody was enthusiastic about their local public school—the basketball team, the football team, the band, the orchestra. Are the rural legislators as enthusiastic about choice?

I would say there probably is a bit less enthusiasm among them, but I also think it takes leadership, and we’ve had some great leaders over the years who have helped paint the picture, or the vision. I don’t think it should be about either-or, but about both. So, you’re not necessarily tearing away at your traditional public schools. It’s about improving everybody’s opportunity.

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Robert Behning