

# What I Learned Editing *Education Next*

*The education landscape may be in better shape than most “experts” think*

By IRA STOLL

WHEN I STARTED AS MANAGING EDITOR of *Education Next* in January 2019, the conventional wisdom was that education reform had run out of gas, or at least stalled out. Much of the Democratic Party, or at least many of its leading politicians, had backed away from previous cautious support for charter schools. Much of the Republican Party, or at least many of its leading politicians, opposed the Common Core State Standards. And neither the Democrats nor the Republicans seemed particularly interested in pushing for once-promising ideas like merit pay for teachers or standardized-test-based accountability.

As I leave the job nearly five years later, the conventional wisdom on education is even grimmer. Republicans complain the schools have gone “woke,” prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion and social-emotional learning instead of reading and math. Democrats complain that Republicans are wasting precious education energy on counterproductive culture wars about transgender sports participation, critical race theory, and the content of school library books. And Republicans, Democrats, and independents alike bemoan the youth mental health crisis and the results of standardized tests showing, indisputably, that the Covid-19 pandemic and the reaction to it have significantly, maybe even catastrophically, set back student achievement.

I’ve got a different view of it. Discount it, perhaps, for my personality, which tends toward optimism, or maybe more precisely, provocative contrarianism. But what’s happened over the past five years has made me more hopeful than ever about the future of American education.

What’s so encouraging that most people are failing to focus on? Start with the U.S. Supreme Court, which in a series of rulings—*American Legion v. American Humanist Association*, *Kennedy v. Bremerton*, *Espinoza v. Montana*, and *Carson v. Makin*—has expanded the space for free exercise of religion in schools. These decisions open the way for many changes, including the establishment of religious charter schools; the nation’s first was initially approved in Oklahoma in June 2023. If you believe, as I do, that religion is, on balance, a force for community, humility, gratitude, kindness, civility, and dignity, then this is a positive and not yet fully appreciated development.

Then consider state legislatures, which have been expanding state tax-credit tuition scholarships (See “School Choice

Advances in the States,” *features*, Fall 2021) and increasingly making Education Savings Accounts universally accessible (see “As Many More States Enact Education Savings Accounts, Implementation Challenges Abound,” *features*, and “2023 Is the Year of Universal Choice in Education Savings Accounts,” *school life*). If you believe, as I do, that parents are generally the best informed and situated to make education decisions involving their own children, these are significant and positive developments. People point out that these programs only affect a fraction of students in a fraction of states. But word spreads to the point where people with children are actually migrating to states, such as Florida, in part for the purpose of participating in the programs. Once the programs are established, eligibility and funding tend to expand rather than contract. As with religious charter schools, the potential of Education Savings Accounts is just beginning to be unleashed.

Finally, the culture wars at school boards and state boards of education may not be so entirely the dead-end distraction that the Acela Corridor education-policy sages imagine. Which is better—that the substance of what happens in schools is left entirely to technocrats and the teachers-union-dominated political structure? Or that parents pay attention to what is happening in school, and make their voices heard? Once the giant political force of parent involvement awakens from its slumber, it might well have effects not only on locker rooms and library books but also, constructively, on school safety, on teacher quality, and on broader issues related to the productivity of education spending.

It may seem Pollyannaish to think of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of expanded education choice and parental involvement rather than mainly in terms of years of lost learning. It may be true, too, that it’ll take decades before the positive effects outweigh the negatives. But another big thing I learned at *Education Next* is that it can take a long time to get a full picture of the effects of education policies. The chance of positive outcomes will be increased by the presence of this journal to report, clear-eyed, with empirical evidence on whether optimism turns out to be misplaced or, as I hope it is, genuinely warranted.

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**MISSION STATEMENT:** In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K–12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.

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