

Republicans In Red States Including Tennessee Join Dems To Resist School Choice Policies

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Mar 19, 2023 DailyWire.com

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Some Republican-led states, including Tennessee, are joining Democrats in actively resisting [school choice policies](#) after dozens of red states have already begun implementing such changes.

School choice, which deposits public education funds directly to families to spend on where their children learn, became popular among Republican and Democratic voters in the wake of the pandemic after parents got an inside look at what their kids were being taught.

Some states, including Arizona, Utah, Iowa, West Virginia, and Arkansas, have adopted such policies, while dozens of others allow parents to take advantage of tax credits or savings programs for private schools or homeschool programs. However, some GOP officials in red states, including Tennessee, Idaho, and Wyoming, are seeing opposition from fellow Republicans.

Tennessee Senate Majority Leader Jack Johnson, a Republican, sponsored education savings account legislation in that state in 2019 targeting poor-performing public school districts with heavy minority populations.

“There was tremendous support for many, in the African American community or Hispanic community, as well as all folks that are in these urban areas where they have a failing school system,” Johnson told The Daily Wire. “That’s kind of where we drew the line for this initial legislation that we pass, and some would love to have statewide universal school choice.”

However, sources working in Tennessee's state capitol told The Daily Wire of the harrowing fight lawmakers endured in passing the legislation due to the nature of the bill, which only covers a few hundred students. Although they expect that number to grow, sources said they don't see universal school choice passing in Tennessee anytime soon due to the backlash not just from Democrats and teacher unions, but also from the overwhelmingly Republican legislature.

The House passed the policy with only one vote, prompting the House Speaker to keep the poll open for nearly an hour while he negotiated with other lawmakers to switch positions. Although Johnson supports expanding the law passed in 2019, he said he would take what he could get.

"I don't want to let the perfect be the enemy of the good," Johnson said. "I support school choice, and where we need it, the most are in the areas where we have it available now."

Idaho House members tried to expand grant programs to help parents pay for private school tuition or offer scholarships, but faced opposition from the state's Republican Governor Brad Little.

Little included in his budget proposal this session a recommendation of \$30 million in ongoing funds toward The Empowering Parents program, which would go toward grants designed for education needs that are up to \$1,000 per student or \$3,000 per family, local media [reported](#). It would only go toward academic instruction for up to 2,000 students per year and prioritize families with the lowest household incomes.

However, Little had made it clear that he does not support public education funds going towards private institutions, saying that allowing such programs to exist would be "taking food out of the mouths of a program that we know is going to work."

Wyoming, which Gallup and Cook political reports mark as the reddest state in the union, had more than half of its Republican House chamber co-sponsoring a school choice bill after it cleared a Senate hurdle. However, Republican House Speaker Albert Sommers blocked its

passage, saying the bill goes against his support for local control and ensures authority stays with local school boards, town councils, and county commissions.

Yet, some of his Republican colleagues argue that Wyoming teachers unions control Sommers because the bill would ban schools from including lessons about sexual orientation.

Rep. John Bear, chair of the Wyoming Freedom Caucus, [said](#) that the state has “a lot of people who run as Republicans but have very progressive beliefs.”

Some Republican leaders and conservative parents oppose school choice legislation on some very different grounds and fear it will deprive public schools of funding.

Their concern is that allowing public funds to go to private institutions and homeschool programs might open the door to allow government interference.

Alex Newman, an analyst for The Freedom Project, explained those concerns from a coalition of Republicans and Democrats that blocked the failed Idaho school choice bill from advancing.

Opponents cited a lack of accountability in the bill, he argued, which presents challenges for homeschoolers using the voucher program.

“Once the money comes, then they’re gonna want accountability,” Newman [said](#). “They’re going to want to know what we’re doing, what are we learning, etcetera, etcetera, and then eventually they’ll want to control it... They were concerned that government funding of homeschooling or private schools would lead almost inevitably to government regulation and then ultimately control.”

Jason Bedrick, an education research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, told The Daily Wire the more families that get involved with investing in private education, whether in a private school or homeschool environment, the greater the constituency there is to defend private

school and homeschool autonomy, “if and when the government decides that they’re going to try to come after you.”

“When it comes to our liberties, the price of liberty is eternal vigilance,” Bedrick said. “So we always have to be vigilant. But I think we also have to recognize that the government doesn’t need to be funding private education for the government to try regulating it.”

Megan Basham contributed to this report.