

ONE COUNTRY

EDUCATING AND TRAINING OUR FUTURE WORKERS

Focusing on political distractions does absolutely nothing to address the real issues facing education across our country. It doesn't close the achievement gap, it doesn't recruit bright young minds into the field of education, it doesn't address the number of underappreciated and under supported educators choosing to leave the profession, and it certainly doesn't improve the quality of meaningful content taught in our classrooms. And the policies put forward in Project 2025 do not reflect the realities of education and workforce needs in rural America.

While private schools should continue to have a place in our education system, school vouchers are not the solution to the challenges in American education. This policy sells short the future of rural America by diverting funds and commitment from our public schools towards private entities seeking profit. More rural primary and secondary schools are forced to make the difficult decision to consolidate across neighboring communities to ensure there is an accessible and staffed school within a reasonable radius (and unfortunately, sometimes not). There is absolutely no evidence to support the assertion that a private for profit school could enter these regions that face complex challenges and reflect the community in the same way as their local public school.

Without a strong school system, rural communities cannot train the next generation of workers, lose a strong social backbone, and struggle to attract and grow families. The decline of a rural school district has a direct impact on the future of the rural community it serves. Communities that lose their local public school often face precipitous drops in populations as the declining services to the community drive more and more families away to live closer to the school their children attend.

We need to invest more in public education, do better to recruit and retain our educator pipeline, and ensure that the quality of learning for rural students is prioritized. Additionally, education beyond primary and secondary school needs to be affordable and reflect the needs of our workforce. This includes supporting college tuition support, technical schools, and apprenticeships.

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School Vouchers

Public schools are the cornerstones of American communities. Yet 29 states have some form of school voucher system in place. Conservatives have hailed school vouchers as the solution to poor educational outcomes in public schools.

In theory, school vouchers provide disadvantaged families the ability to send their children to private schools and receive a better education.

In practice, however, vouchers divert taxpayer dollars from public school systems to fund private education. The structure of the school voucher system lacks accountability, can deny enrollment (and thus, education) to children on arbitrary grounds, and drains America's already underfunded public schools.

Draining resources from public school classrooms turns against the teachers and administrators who work to provide a quality education – and threatens children's futures.

Many rural counties lack a private school in their district, so while wealthy families whose children are already enrolled in private schools get to benefit from voucher funding, rural families, who often have no choice or transportation options but to send their kids to their local public schools, see funds being drained from a public institution that employs and educates their community.

Plus, new findings have shown that, in fact, school vouchers are helping middle-income families whose children are already in private school, rather than low-income students who continue to attend public school.

Rather than boosting American public school systems in need of funding, vouchers are pushing those vital resources to a program that lacks accountability to the very taxpayers that foot the bill. As more red states seek to establish similar programs, it is critical to protect the quality of public schools and protect the future of our kids, regardless of where they live or their families' finances.

School choice is a misnomer, leading people to believe that vouchers award disadvantaged families the same choice that affluent families enjoy, thus leveling the playing field. This rhetoric is misleading in many ways.

The benefit of vouchers in urban areas is debatable, but the negative impact on rural communities is clear. Most rural and small-town communities have only one school – a public school – in the area. Without a religious or private school in the area, taxpayers will primarily help students in more populated areas in the state as funding is drained from rural schools.

Voucher programs leave children behind. Children who are disabled or have special needs will also lose out from any ostensible benefits of this program. Private and charter schools do not have to accept vouchers from anyone. They can cherry pick students that are already primed for academic success and claim that success derives from their educational programs, all while ignoring the applications of students who have disabilities. Parents of these kids don't get to choose – these unaccountable private schools do.

□ School Vouchers

In addition to increasing inequities, school voucher programs lack accountability and oversight. There are few, if any, mechanisms in place that would guarantee scholastic, administrative, or financial transparency for private, religious, or parochial schools. Because private schools don't have to adhere to the same admissions rules as their public counterparts, they have the power to self-select students, leaving behind children who are disadvantaged or disabled.

Instead of experimenting with a flawed and risky idea like school vouchers, let's put our efforts toward attracting and retaining educational professionals to combat a state-wide teacher shortage. Let's make sure that their salaries and benefits - such as daycare for teachers - are competitive and geared toward long-term professional development.

What to Say

- School voucher schemes benefit upper income families at the expense of middle class and working-class families.
- School voucher schemes drain resources from rural communities to fund private and religious schools in cities and suburbs.
- School voucher schemes do not include rigorous oversight and reporting on academic progress - creating an incentive for financial fraud and misuse of public monies.
- School voucher schemes decimate funding for special education that benefits students who have disabilities.

Endorsements

School Social Workers Improving Student Success Act

This bill provides certain resources to increase the number of social workers in elementary and secondary schools. Specifically, the bill directs the Department of Education to award grants to high-need local educational agencies to retain or hire school social workers. The bill also establishes a national technical assistance center for school social work to, among other duties, develop strategies for improving the effectiveness of the school social work workforce.

Family Friendly Schools Act

This bill establishes a pilot program to implement policies at elementary schools that align the school day with the work day. It also establishes a grant program to support programs and activities during summer recess.

Rebuild America's Schools Act of 2023

This bill provides support for long-term improvements to public elementary and secondary school facilities.

Universal Prekindergarten and Early Childhood Education Act of 2024

This bill authorizes through FY2030 a grant program for states to establish or expand full-day prekindergarten programs that (1) permit each three- or four-year old child in the state to be voluntarily enrolled by the child's parent, regardless of income, in the program at the public school in which the child would be enrolled for kindergarten; (2) run the length of the regular school year; and (3) are taught by teachers who possess equivalent or similar qualifications to those of teachers of other grades in the school.

□ Teachers

In the last several years, teachers' flexibility, courage, and resilience has been put to the test as we've dealt with the unforeseen consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Without advance notice, teachers improvised to change lesson plans to accommodate virtual learning and education from home. They were also caught in the middle when it came to implementing health guidelines, sometimes with conflicting mandates or little direction. Yet, they remained focused on the very thing that made them become teachers in the first place - they focused on students. They focused on teaching despite the obstacles, the inconvenience, and the uncertainty of what could come next. Their perseverance and adaptability were simply heroic and deserving of our genuine praise and highest recognition.

Excellent teachers unlock the limitless potential within all of us. They fuel our quest for discovery, innovation, and invention. However, the teaching profession has become an increasingly difficult one as a combination of declining wages and benefits, the politicization of curricula, and manufactured culture war hysteria exert unnecessary pressures on teachers.

Public schools across America need funds for auxiliary teachers, classroom supplies, and incentives to bolster teacher recruitment and retention. Teachers themselves need professional support and classroom resources to effectively teach students.

What to Say

- We must raise teacher pay and invest more resources into community public schools.
- Politics do not belong in the classroom or course curricula. We must remove the culture war outrages from classrooms and allow teachers to do their jobs.

Endorsements

Addressing Teacher Shortages Act of 2024

This bill directs the Department of Education (ED) to establish an Addressing Teacher Shortages Program. Through this program, ED shall award grants for local educational agencies to address teacher shortage challenges. Specifically, grant funds may be used to establish or expand teaching residency programs, teacher mentor programs, specified recruitment and training programs, and other evidence-based strategies to increase teacher retention and support teachers.

American Teacher Act

This bill establishes grants to increase the minimum salary of public elementary and secondary teachers. The bill awards four-year grants to local educational agencies to establish a minimum annual salary of \$60,000 (adjusted annually for inflation) for teachers. The bill also awards grants to eligible state educational agencies to provide cost-of-living adjustments to the annual base salary of teachers.

Teacher Diversity and Retention Act

The bill reauthorizes and revises the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence program, which provides grants to establish teacher preparation programs at minority-serving institutions. In addition, the bill consolidates certain grant programs for teacher preparation into a single grant program. The ED would award grants to eligible partnerships to expand teacher preparation programs that embed dual certification in special education and training on social and emotional learning competencies and behavior management practices.

Teacher Debt Relief Act

This bill allows an eligible teacher to use the same teaching service to qualify for both the Teacher Loan Forgiveness program and the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program.

□ Apprenticeship Programs

High schoolers are increasingly looking ahead, not to a four-year college but to trade careers that are integral to our economy and even more so in rural areas. Student enrollment in vocational training programs jumped 16 percent last year. Many members of Gen Z see the growing salaries and job security of electricians, plumbers, and other skilled tradespeople and find technical training to be a more lucrative investment than a four-year college degree. The surge comes as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Inflation Reduction Act, and the CHIPS and Science Act work to create new skilled domestic jobs.

We are also in a time of strengthening support for unions. Gen Z, the most pro-union generation, see trade unions as an avenue to help workers achieve economic security. While Gen Z's enthusiasm is beginning to fill in the gaps left by older workers' retirement, the technical jobs labor shortage isn't over quite yet.

A variety of solutions to encourage more people to join the trades are arising around the country. A partnership between the University of Wyoming and local community colleges is creating a new CTE curriculum to meet students where they are - and ensure that a new generation of teachers and tradespeople can continue their work.

Recently, OCP founder and former U.S. Senator Heidi Heitkamp spoke to Nick Fouriezos, a rural education reporter with Open Campus Media, about Montana's programs providing students micro-degrees in trades - providing more flexible skill sets and opening access to high-paying jobs.

What to Say

- Several of the fastest growing sectors of the American economy are in the skilled trades. Many of these jobs require technical training, but do not necessarily require a college degree. Apprenticeship programs can unlock the potential of younger Americans and set them up for successful careers.
- Career and Technical Education is central to reversing the unfair stigma that jobs in the trades are lesser than jobs that require a college degree.
- With the majority of workers in the skilled trades contemplating retirement in the next five years, we must act now to avoid a massive disruption in this key part of the economy.

Endorsements

American Apprenticeship Act

This bill authorizes the Department of Labor (DL) to make grants to assist states in carrying out projects that defray the cost of pre-apprenticeship or related instruction for qualified apprenticeship programs. Labor shall establish performance measures and an evaluation system for such grant program; and identify in-demand occupations that lack the use of apprenticeships, analyze the use of the qualified apprenticeship program model in those occupations, and report on such analysis to states and Congress.

Apprenticeship Hubs Across America Act of 2023

This bill requires DL to implement a program to award grants to national, regional, state, or local entities that facilitate the establishment of registered apprenticeship programs to enable them to engage a variety of stakeholders to support, develop, and implement registered apprenticeship programs.

Apprenticeships to College Act

This bill requires DL to enter into an interagency agreement with ED to promote and support integration and alignment of programs under the national apprenticeship system with secondary, postsecondary, and adult education.