

Federally Funded School Vouchers: Contrasting Party Views



Between now and November 5th, we are running a series of 10 Q&As with NEPC Fellows about education issues relevant to the 2024 federal election. The goal of the series is to inform readers about the education-related stances of the nation's two major political parties, drawing upon the Republican and Democratic parties' national platforms and on Project 2025. Q&A participants were selected on the basis of their research expertise on the topics they have been asked to address. In addition to describing the parties' positions, each expert is providing background information, with a focus on summarizing research findings.

This newsletter focuses on the current and proposed federal role in school vouchers, which provide public funding for private schools. [Josh Cowen](#), a professor of education policy at Michigan State University, is the expert responding to today's questions. Cowen is a visiting senior fellow at the Education Law Center, and author of [*The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers*](#).

1. *From a historical perspective, why has the federal government been engaged in this issue?*

To date, federal involvement in vouchers has so far been limited. The [D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program](#), signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2004, remains the only federally funded voucher system—although congressional Republicans have in recent years regularly proposed [one version of a national system](#) through a tax

credit scheme.

2. *From a research perspective, how has federal government involvement been helpful or harmful to preparing students of different backgrounds to succeed in college, career, and life?*

With respect to vouchers, this issue has not been addressed at the federal level. Although voucher backers point to college and career attainment as one potential benefit for school vouchers, they have considerably [overstated research evidence](#) to support that claim. As far as diverse backgrounds are concerned, one issue that has created clear distinction with respect to the federal government is the set of Title IX protections as they pertain to LGBTQ students. Essentially, a Trump-Project 2025 interpretation of Title IX would all but [exclude LGBTQ discrimination](#) from federal bans on gender-based discrimination. This is related to school vouchers directly because state versions of voucher systems have shown [troubling evidence of discrimination](#) against LGBTQ+ families, and there is no expectation that such patterns would resolve simply because federal dollars became involved. That is because if an expanded version of a voucher system did make it through congressional lawmaking and was signed by President Trump, it is reasonable to expect that federal guidance would permit schools to retain admissions and staffing criteria consistent with their religious mission—just as [recent state laws have](#).

3. *Based on your own research expertise, how (if at all) should the federal role on this issue shift? What is the justification for those recommendations?*

Given [substantial evidence](#) that school vouchers cause substantial declines in student learning, an evidence-based approach from the federal government would be to continue to exclude school voucher systems from its funding portfolio, and eventually eliminate the D.C. voucher system—[one of the sites](#) to display negative impacts on student learning over time.

4. *Please briefly explain how Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform address this issue. (If this issue is not addressed by Project 2025, the RNC platform, or the DNC platform, please note that.)*

Universal school vouchers headline the education chapter of [Project 2025](#), representing two of the first three paragraphs in that section. The foreword to Project 2025, written by Kevin Roberts of the Heritage Foundation, demands that all conservative presidential candidates onward support universal vouchers. Similarly, [Trump 47](#), the official presidential platform, also contains a call for universal school vouchers. Neither document has much in the way of policy detail, apart from broad demands for those universal voucher systems based on slogans like “every parent should have the option to direct his or her child’s share of education funding” through voucher designs like education savings accounts. These are [vouchers-plus](#) plans that include the classic private tuition component plus add-ons like homeschool expenses. The DNC platform makes no such demands.

5. *What is your response to the ways in which this issue is addressed by Project 2025,*

the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform, based on your knowledge of the research in this area?

The calls for universal vouchers in Project 2025 and Trump 47 are largely ideological. In Project 2025's foreword, for example, the call for universal school vouchers precedes a paragraph condemning "the noxious tenets of 'critical race theory' and 'gender ideology.'" And [Trump 47](#) promises to "cut federal funding for any school pushing critical race theory, radical gender ideology, and other inappropriate racial, sexual, or political content on our children." An exhaustive search of the language in the DNC platform failed to find evidence of these preoccupations.

Prior newsletters in this series:

[What Role Should the Federal Government Play in Education Policy?](#)

[Help or Harmful? The Federal Role in Supporting Students with Disabilities in Schools](#)

[Protections Against Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination in Schools: The Federal Role](#)

NEPC Resources on Vouchers

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