

It's National School Choice Week. What is that? (Possibly not what you think.)



Education Secretary Betsy DeVos greets students, parents and educators at a 2017 National School Choice rally on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. (Maria Danilova/AP)



By [Valerie Strauss](#)

January 21 at 1:33 PM

This is National School Choice Week, an annual occasion that features (literally) tens of thousands of independent events around the country that celebrate the “school choice” movement. Its [website](#) says this:

These celebratory events raise public awareness of the different K-12 education options available to children and families while also spotlighting the benefits of school choice.

NSCW recognizes all K-12 options, including traditional public schools, public charter schools, public magnet schools, private schools, online academies, and homeschooling.

Most, if not virtually all, of the events planned for the week are staged by schools and organizations and people who support alternatives to traditionally operated public school districts. Those include charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately run, sometimes by for-profit companies, and various programs that use public funds to pay for private and religious school.

National School Choice Week is an organization as well as a week, and came into existence in 2011. School choice proponents say that alternatives to traditional districts are necessary to give families options, especially in places where traditional public schools have failed. School choice opponents say that school choice is aimed at privatizing the public education system and that many of the choices being offered are not well-regulated, sometimes discriminatory and siphon funding away from local school districts. (You can be sure that this week's events won't mention the many charter sectors around the country that are riddled with scandal.)

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos is a big fan of school choice and National School Choice Week, appearing at events in years past (as you can see in the picture above). DeVos has been advocating for alternatives to traditional school districts for decades and called traditional public schools “a dead end” before she became education secretary. She has stated that her mission as the nation's top education official is to expand school choice.

[\[Betsy DeVos, in first public appearance after bike accident, criticizes helicopter parents who obsess on 'safety and security'\]](#)

This post about National School Choice Week is written by Carol Burris, a strong critic of school choice. She is a former award-winning New York high school principal who serves as executive director of the [Network for Public Education](#), a nonprofit advocacy group.

Burris was named the 2010 Educator of the Year by the School Administrators Association of New York State, and in 2013, the National Association of Secondary School Principals named her the New York State High School Principal of the Year. Burris has been chronicling problems with modern school restructuring and school choice for years on this blog.

[\[Can charter schools be reformed? Should they be?\]](#)

By Carol Burris

This week is National School Choice Week. Despite its image of a grass-roots celebration of every imaginable alternative to neighborhood public schools, the week is a carefully crafted public relations campaign designed to remind lawmakers of the financial muscle of its sponsors.

Children, wrapped in bright yellow scarves, will dance and sing to inspire legislative and financial support for “choice.” Beneath all of the fanfare, however, is a push for policies designed to undermine most Americans' first choice — neighborhood public schools.

Planning and managing National School Choice Week is a year-long endeavor. National School Choice Week is an organization, yet it has no donate button, nonprofit status statement, nor 990 income tax form that I can find. It does have a [president who used to work for Education Secretary Betsy DeVos](#) at the American Federation for Children, a 501(c)(4) lobbying and advocacy group founded by her billionaire family.

The week has an [official dance](#) and on its website is a [“happiness blog”](#) on which representatives of an [online charter chain](#), connected to the for-profit K-12, encourage everyone to paint a rock to show their love for “choice.”

It also has lots of right-wing billionaire bucks behind it. [In 2016, Media Matters](#), a progressive nonprofit that researches conservative groups, did a masterful job of exposing where the money comes from to fund National School Choice Week. The week was started by the right-wing Gleason Family Foundation that also funds the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Uncommon Charter Schools, the libertarian Cato Institute and anti-union organizations that promote “right to work.”

According to [the Center for Media and Democracy](#), the National School Choice Week website listed the American Federation for Children, the Walton Family Fund, ALEC, SPN, the Freedom Foundation, FreedomWorks, Cato Institute, Reason Foundation, the Heritage Foundation, the James Madison Institute, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce as education partners in 2016. [Using the Wayback Machine](#), you will also find so-called progressive organizations such as Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), KIPP and Education Reform Now on the partners’ list that year.

You can’t find any of the partners or funding information on the website today, however, nor could you last year.

The “school choice movement” did not begin with its first celebratory week in 2011. The founder of the modern school choice movement was libertarian economist Milton Friedman who proposed the idea of school vouchers in 1955. A true privatizer, Friedman also believed that [Social Security should be shut down](#) because it created welfare dependency, that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) should be abolished, and that the [licensing of doctors should be eliminated](#) because the American Medical Association was “a monopoly.”

[In this video titled “The Enemies of School Choice,”](#) Friedman begins by boldly claiming that choice and vouchers “would solve all of the critical problems” faced by schools. According to Friedman, school vouchers would eliminate discipline problems, reduce segregation and solve the problem of school busing. He presented no evidence, just claims based on his disdain for government regulation. When vouchers were deemed unconstitutional in some states and rejected by the public in others, advocates of choice moved to charter schools as well as neo-vouchers that are designed to disguise the public funding of private and religious schools.

The choice movement is now embraced by billionaires for whom it has become a cause celebre. They fund not only charter school chains but also groups that lobby on their behalf, as well as the political campaigns of those who want to expand charters, and in some cases, vouchers.

They will also fund campaigns deliberately designed to thwart the public’s will when it gets in the way. In 2012, for example, the Washington State Charter School Ballot Initiative passed by a very slim margin, 50.69 percent in favor to 49.31 percent opposed. But the close vote is not the story.

The 2012 initiative was Washington State's fourth charter school ballot initiative. The previous three attempts failed — in 1996 (64.43 percent opposed to 35.57 percent in favor), 2000 (51.83 percent opposed to 48.17 percent in favor), and 2004 (58.3 percent opposed to 41.7 percent in favor).

The fourth and final attempt was not pushed by the parents of Washington State. It was pushed and funded by billionaires. The collection of signatures to get the charter initiative on the ballot was a well-coordinated effort that cost nearly \$2.5 million.

Funders of the initiative included Microsoft founder Bill Gates (who contributed over \$1 million) and California billionaire Reed Hastings of Netflix. A dark-money group based in New York — Education Reform Now Advocacy, an arm of Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) — contributed large sums as well.

After the referendum to approve charters was placed on the ballot, Gates put up over \$2 million, a sum that was nearly matched by out-of-state billionaire Alice Walton. In all total, Washington billionaire Paul Vulcan spent over \$1.6 million as well.

Without the financial push by billionaires both within and outside the state, the initiative, which barely passed on the fourth attempt, would likely have failed, as did the three previous efforts.

Let's fast forward to 2019. What was the outcome for all of those millions contributed allegedly on students' behalf?

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, which is funded by pro-charter organizations, recently issued [its report](#) comparing the academic growth over a three-year period of students in Washington's charter schools when compared with their true public school (TPS) counterparts. What it found was that charter school students did no better.

From that report:

“Over that time, the typical charter school student in Washington demonstrated no statistically different academic growth in reading and math when compared to their exact-match counterpart in nearby district schools (TPS). The trend across the two growth periods shows a slight downward trend in reading and math as the number of students served grew. The finding of no meaningful difference in learning gains held across most of the different student groups within the charter population. Only English language learners [ELLs] experience significantly higher learning gains associated with charter school attendance. Other student subgroups such as students in poverty, Black students, and Hispanic students experience non-significant positive gains on average. “

It should be noted that the small gains experienced by English Language Learners disappeared when Hispanic ELLs in charters were compared with Hispanic ELLs in public schools. The report also confirmed that charters in Washington, as elsewhere, enrolled fewer special education students and fewer ELLs.

No improvement for all of the millions spent.

To see all of the billionaires and dark-money organizations that supported the Washington referendum, read the Network for Public Education's action report, "[Hijacked by Billionaires: How the Super Rich Buy Elections to Undermine Public Schools.](#)" In that report, you will find billionaires inserting huge sums of money to support both big and small elections across the nation to support privatized school choice.

In study after study, when it comes to academics, students in charters overall do no better than students in true public schools, and the preponderance of research on vouchers show that students who leave public schools for private or religious schools do the same or worse.

Meanwhile, the [evidence of scandal and the abuse of taxpayer funds mounts](#). Choice is sometimes used [to enable segregation](#). The [civil rights of students are disregarded](#), especially in voucher schools. And yet billionaires still push the privatization of our democratically controlled public schools, siphoning public dollars away from them.

[\[North Carolina passes charter school law that critics say is intended to promote segregation\]](#)