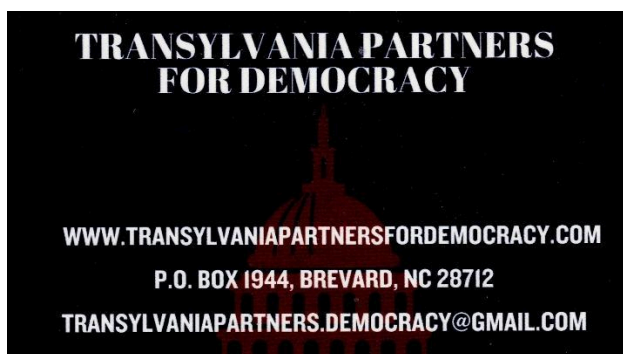




FACT SHEET: Education Under Siege

Part I: A (very) brief history of public schools in America, 1644-1958.

In 1644, Dedham, Massachusetts' citizens authorized the first taxpayer-funded public school in North America. By 1870, every state had some level of tax-supported schools for at least seven years of education, and the United States had one of the highest literacy rates in the world.

As the immigration of non-English-speaking Europeans grew in the late 19th and early 20th century, education took on a new importance. Concerned over the potential for ethnic divisions and conflict, public education took on a new role: "Americanizing" the new arrivals. New immigrants may have been reluctant to abandon their cultural heritage, but they embraced education as a way to achieve acceptance and success in their new land. At the same time, however, the shadow of slavery, the resurgence of white supremacy in the former Confederacy and extensive poverty in the post-Civil War South meant that public education—underfunded for all students in the region—became almost non-existent for generations of Black Southerners.

The Cold War led to an intense re-evaluation of curriculum and educational standards. Americans feared that the Soviet Union's rigorous emphasis on scientific and technological education would outpace the United States. State and local spending for public education increased significantly and, for the first time, the federal government began to provide funding to public schools with the 1958 National Defense Education Act.

With that increased funding came criticism of our public school system. In the 1960s and 1970s, critics complained of inadequate performance in science and math while liberals emphasized issues of inequity and funding disparities that left students from disadvantaged backgrounds further handicapped. That criticism has continued, expanding to concerns over the negative effects of social media and the failure to support the most critical link in education, our teachers. (Adjusted for inflation, teacher pay in North Carolina has declined 13 per cent since 2010.) But few critics challenged the central role of publicly funded education at the K1-12 level.

Part II: The Initial Assaults on Public Education: 1958-2016

Attempts to *replace* public education with private schools have their roots in the racial upheavals and "cultural" clashes of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. In 1955, University of Chicago libertarian (and Nobel Prize economist) Milton Friedman published an essay, "The Role of Government in Education." Friedman called for the creation of a national system of private schools funded by "vouchers" to parents for the education of their children. The ideal outcome, he wrote, would be to "abolish the public school system and eliminate all the taxes that pay for it."

His proposal arrived at an opportune moment for libertarian opponents of public education as school desegregation expanded and white backlash grew, North and South. Whatever their personal racial views,

ideologues like Friedman and, notably, Nobel Prize winning economist James Buchanan, worked closely with leaders of the white supremacist “Massive Resistance” campaign of the 1950s to promote “race-neutral” ideological justifications for the expansion of overwhelmingly white private schools.

Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, this relatively minor libertarian intellectual movement gained extensive financial support from over 60 major conservative foundations and think tanks. From the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation through the most influential funder of all, the Koch brothers’ network of far-right groups, libertarian anti-government ideologues skillfully exploited divisive conflicts to argue that taxpayer supported monopolistic “government” schools should be replaced by government support for private and religious schools as alternatives.

Like some of the libertarian proponents of private schools, many of these wealthy interests were not obsessed with cultural and racial issues, but they found common cause in their revolt against the increased role of government in the nation. And over the past decade, the movement for tax-supported private schools found an appealing slogan: “Parental Choice.” (In 2016, the Friedman Foundation, created to promote the replacement of public with private schools, changed its name to “EdChoice.”) Pollsters began to see a growing support for some version of government supported assistance to non-public traditional education, whether through charter schools or direct vouchers. The culture wars of the last decades (particularly surrounding issues of sexuality) also led to increasing support for government support for private schools among white evangelical Christians.

By 2017, fourteen states and the District of Columbia had adopted some limited form of voucher programs. Initially, they were budgeted at relatively low levels and often were directed toward supporting low-income families in failing school systems. By 2024, however, such voucher programs had nearly doubled to 33 states, twelve with *no* income restrictions for parents. This occurred despite the fact that, in every one of the six states where voters were given a choice, they rejected state funding for private schools. And for good reasons. Arizona has been a case study of the results of such unlimited plans. The state’s 2022 “Universal Choice” program has shifted over 8.5 percent of state funding to private schools. Ninety per cent of that funding went to the wealthiest 25 per cent of school parents, mostly in urban areas where private schools were more common.

Here in North Carolina, a voucher system for private schools originally created to help parents in failing schools has grown from \$14 million in 2013 to \$463.5 million in 2024 with future commitments that will cost billions, inevitably weakening support for our public school system. This transfer of funds to poorly supervised private schools is taking place even as public school teacher pay in North Carolina has fallen in national rankings from 19th in 2004 to 43rd in 2023.

Nor are such cuts limited to public schools. The current North Carolina Senate Budget proposal calls for \$185 million in cuts to the UNC higher education system over the next three years.

Part IV: The Current Crisis for Public Schools *and* Higher Education

The election of the second Trump Administration has led to further challenges to America’s educational system. As part of the administration’s commitment to abolishing the Department of Education, the current proposed budget would cut \$12 billion from the Department. Although the precise nature of these cuts depends upon the final version, the current GOP budget proposal will reduce funding for Head Start, childcare grants, school-based meals, students with disabilities, special education and other programs for the nation’s most vulnerable children. The only K-1 through 12 education programs that receive an increase are a \$93 million addition to last year’s \$440 million budget to promote the expansion of charter schools across the nation and a federal school voucher program of \$20 billion funded through changes in the federal tax code.

Here in Transylvania County, approximately 14 per cent of our public-school budget comes directly from federal funding. The current cuts and the slashing of other federal programs that support low-income students, coupled with inevitable reductions in state support as state funds are shifted to private schools, means that our county, and other rural counties where private schools are uncommon, will see public school funding reduced in order to support vouchers in more affluent, heavily suburban school districts.

An equally fundamental threat to our national future comes from an administration opposed to vigorous debate and freedom of expression and action that has characterized the best of education in America. Federal support for education in the United States has not only strengthened our K-1 through 12 public schools, it has also created a higher education system that is the envy of other nations. Five per cent of the nation's undergraduate students and over 25 percent of US graduate students--concentrated in scientific and technical fields--are international students, many of whom will remain in the United States and strengthen our scientific leadership in the world.

Instead of welcoming these talented individuals to our shores, the Trump administration has sought to block their enrollment by grossly exaggerating claims that foreign students are “anti-Semitic” or “Anti-American.” The same false accusations of white discrimination (woke/DEI/ “elitism” /liberalism, etc. are used to attack education at every level, particularly colleges and universities. Their purpose is clear. Using the federal power of the purse the current administration has sought to crush dissenting voices that oppose its policies. Scholars studying this issue agree: such ruthless efforts to control education at every level, particularly intellectuals and higher education institutions, is the mark of an authoritarian and anti-democratic regime.

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