

ADMIN &amp; MANAGEMENT

# New era of school choice: Federal directives, state expansions, and district considerations

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore February 6, 2025



Immediately following the elections, we wrote about [school choice](#) and case studies of districts playing the long game on the issue. Twelve governors recently announced plans to expand school choice in their [State of the State addresses](#).

President Donald Trump's recent executive order on school choice outlines a broad effort to expand educational opportunities for families by directing multiple federal agencies to explore ways to increase access to a variety of schooling options. The Department of Education has been tasked with issuing guidance on how federal funds can support scholarship programs for K12 students.

The Department of Defense will develop a plan to help military families utilize DoD funds for schools that best fit their needs, while the Department of the Interior will examine how students attending Bureau of Indian Education schools can access federal dollars for alternative educational opportunities.

Additionally, the Department of Health and Human Services will clarify how states can use existing HHS funds to support private and faith-based school enrollment. These efforts signal a federal focus on providing families with more flexibility in choosing the best educational environment for their children.



School choice generally expands two key types of options for families and students. The first—and most familiar—involves using taxpayer dollars to subsidize non-district schools, such as independent or faith-based institutions, through tuition reimbursement or direct public funding.

The second, less obvious but increasingly debated, is the push to “unbundle” district programs and services. This could allow home-schooled or private school students to access specific district offerings, such as enrolling in an AP course, participating in co-curricular activities or receiving tutoring—without attending a district school full-time.

Using the [White House Fact Sheet](#) on school choice as a guide, we organized key facts, likely scenarios, and reflection questions to help superintendents and cabinet leaders prepare.

## K12 scholarships and federal funding

**Key facts:** According to the Biennial Collection of data on the characteristics of all K12 private schools, approximately 4.7 million students are enrolled in 29,700 private schools with 483,000 full-time-equivalent teachers across the United States (NCES). Overall the number of private schools has decreased in recent years.

**Likely scenario:** The Department of Education will issue guidance on how states can use federal funding to fund scholarship and vouchers programs for private school access. Multiple states already have guidance on the use of state funds.

Federal funding allows for a percentage of set-asides by states to use for state-directed allocations. This could allow for an increase in the set-aside percentage and greater flexibility in how funds are used.

ESEA contains a provision for equitable services, which allows private schools to access their ‘fair share’ of federal funds in proportion with local school districts. These schools frequently ‘pool funds’ and collaborate on purchasing services and tapping program offerings of school districts.

### Questions to ask:

1. How do state leaders currently allocate any state subsidies for private school scholarships?
2. Are they likely to replace state funds with federal funds or expand the amount of available dollars?
3. How confident are you in your equitable services process—consultation, identification, determination, and delivery of services—and how might it be improved?

## Prioritization of school choice by the secretary of education

**Key facts:** Each cabinet member aligns their priorities with the Trump administration’s broader agenda. The president has pledged to dismantle the Department of Education and a version of that might be true by way of redirecting as many grants as possible toward school choice options.



This practice began 20 years ago when Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, through No Child Left Behind, required districts to offer students in low-performing schools the option to transfer to higher-performing public schools within the district. This policy was not about expanding private school vouchers, per se, but rather about increasing intra-district choice within the public school system.

Similarly, Supplemental Educational Services provided free tutoring to families with children in Title I schools that repeatedly failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress. State-approved providers—including private companies and nonprofit organizations—delivered these services, introducing market-driven choice into public education by allowing parents to select providers outside their child's school.

While the federal SES mandate ended nearly a decade ago, many states have maintained similar tutoring expectations, increasingly using them as part of compensatory education efforts to address learning gaps.

**Likely scenario:** If Linda McMahon prioritizes school choice as education secretary, federal grant applications will likely include absolute and competitive preference conditions to incentivize its adoption. Discretionary funds, typically allocated through adjustable formulas, can be structured to support priority areas, while competitive grants rely on scoring rubrics that assign points based on alignment with federal priorities.

By embedding school choice preferences into these funding mechanisms, only grant proposals that incorporate school choice strategies are likely to receive awards.

#### Questions to ask:

1. Do you have a working relationship with charter management organizations and private schools in your community?
2. Can you establish an MOU or similar agreement, to make sure you are serving families in your community and achieving win/wins?
3. Is your team prepared to honor grant priority areas when applying for competitive grants?

## Community Services Block Grants through Health & Human Services

**Key facts:** Community Services Block Grants provide funds to states, territories and tribes to support a network of local agencies that offer services aimed at reducing poverty, revitalizing low-income communities and empowering low-income families and individuals to become self-sufficient. Education activities are an allowable use of these funds.

CSBG traces its origins to the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson as part of his War on Poverty. In 1981, the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act under President Ronald Reagan consolidated federal anti-poverty efforts into block grants.

CSBG has been periodically reauthorized with a continued focus on workforce development, education, housing, health services and economic empowerment. The first Trump administration's CARES Act (2020) included additional CSBG funding to help low-income communities recover from the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently,



Community Action Agencies use CSBG funds to support education initiatives such as Head Start, tutoring, and out-of-school-time programs.

**Likely scenario:** Some Community Action Agencies will use CSBG funds to expand their education programs to include preschool programming in underserved communities. There are several positive examples that might expand in underserved communities.

For example, Community Action Agencies in Kentucky partner with local schools to provide wraparound services for Head Start children, including literacy programs, health screenings and family engagement workshops.

In Texas, Community Action Agencies run after-school tutoring programs that help low-income elementary students improve literacy and math skills. The program also provides meals and connects families with social services. Community Action Agencies can also use these funds to support dual enrollment programs, which might be a way of deferring some of the cost of dual enrollment in K12 budgets.

CSBG funds also assist in career and technical education, providing students with skills for high-demand industries like healthcare, manufacturing and IT. A Florida-based Community Action Agency funds job training scholarships for high school seniors entering technical colleges or apprenticeship programs. These funds are very flexible and can even be used to subsidize the cost of transportation for low income students.

#### Questions to ask:

1. How can you partner with local agencies to cost-share needed services like early education, tutoring, out-of-school-time programs, and transportation?
2. Are your local Title I funds supplementing preschool and, if so, how can you work with community agencies to align your resources and stretch dollars further to serve more families?
3. Does your CTE team have a relationship with any of the agencies receiving these funds and do they collaborate?

## Department of Defense, Bureau of Indian Education and school choice

**Key facts:** The Department of Defense runs schools and childcare programs on military bases worldwide, functioning much like a large school district to provide continuity of learning for service members' children. Tuition assistance is also available for military spouses, so it can be assumed that this benefit will be extended to dependent children through cost-reimbursement.

Resources are used to support the cost of these schools and programs, to include funding for school liaison officers, who assist these families in navigating local school systems, ensuring smooth transitions during deployments and relocations.

Similarly, the Bureau of Indian Affairs—part of the U.S. Department of the Interior—oversees 183 elementary and secondary schools across 23 states, serving approximately 46,000 students. This includes boarding schools, day schools and on-reservation schools to meet diverse student needs.



These schools receive Bureau of Indian Affairs funding but have tribal governance, allowing more autonomy in providing culturally relevant education and incorporating tribal languages and traditions.

**Likely scenario:** The Department of Defense will issue guidance for school liaison officers to ensure that private and other choice options are discussed and maximized during transitions. It's likely that a voucher system will be organized, allowing military-connected students to attend private or parochial schools and other choice options.

Similarly, the Bureau of Indian Affairs will issue guidance that authorizes vouchers to expand access to private schools and encourage enrollment in charter schools.

**Questions to ask:**

1. How many military-connected families are in your community?
2. Are there opportunities to braid Impact Aid funds with emerging resources from the DoD?
3. Are private schools in the community at capacity and/or do they need help supporting service-connected or tribal families in their transitions?
4. Are choice options part of 'meaningful consultation' with tribal community leaders and, if not, what can the team do to improve?

School choice is no longer a theoretical debate—it's here and it's evolving fast. Whether you're expanding partnerships, revisiting funding strategies or just bracing for the next round of federal guidance, one thing is clear: adaptability is the new superpower in K12 leadership.

And if all else fails, just remember—even the best-laid plans for school choice can't compete with strong and supportive relationships between your team and families. Stay flexible, stay informed, build relationships with families and let's keep making choices that work for all students.

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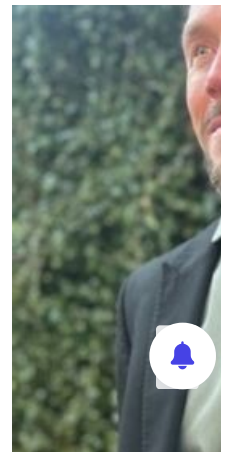
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