

# Judging the Public/ Private Education Fight

*OU professor Deven Carlson stands ringside as the go-to expert in the tumultuous national debate over “school choice.”*

BY WHITNEY BRYEN

**A S A GRADUATE STUDENT** at the University of Wisconsin-Madison 15 years ago, Deven Carlson was part of a team evaluating the nation's first private school voucher program.

Now, one of the nation's most influential education scholars and a widely cited

expert on vouchers watches from his office in the University of Oklahoma's Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis as the issue becomes the centerpiece of a national debate.

Arguments for and against plans to subsidize private school tuition play like a rerun

for the OU Presidential Research Professor and the institute's associate director of education, who has spent the past decade following debates in more than 12 states, written widely on the subject, and been interviewed by national media from *The Washington Post* to *The Wall Street Journal*.





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Pushback against vouchers is led by concerns over lack of equity and accountability, while supporters promote parental rights and access to private education for lower-income families.

This argument has played out in Texas, Kansas and Nebraska, where lawmakers have so far rejected policies that channel public dollars directly to parents for learning expenses or private school tuition, as well as in states like Arizona, Ohio and Iowa, where such programs have passed the legislature and been signed into law.

"The debate has proceeded without much in the way of surprises in my view," Carlson says of lawmakers' moti-

ations for and against the latest school choice plans.

A wave of legislation aimed at increasing parents' options for educating their kids swept the nation in 2021 after the pandemic led to school closures, virtual schooling and adjusted schedules. Students fell behind. Policymakers responded with what has been deemed the "school choice movement," which has been building over the past three decades with the support of major donors and political action committees.

Most public school districts assign students to schools on the basis of where they live—each neighborhood is assigned to a given school. School choice, some-

times called parental choice, "is basically anything else," Carlson says.

Charter schools, open enrollment, private school vouchers, education savings accounts and tax credits are some of the most common options promoted by the school choice movement.

Disputes arise over how these options are funded, who has access to them and how vulnerable they are to exploitation, Carlson says. Critics of vouchers say even narrow policies that target students in a specific community or limit eligibility to a specific district are dangerous because expansion is inevitable.

"One of the defining features of the school choice movement is that once a school choice policy gets in place, it never gets scaled back," he says.

### RISKY BUSINESS

Early this year, the RHSU Edu-Scholar Public Influence Rankings list named Carlson one of the country's 200 most influential education scholars based on nine criteria. Carlson is co-author of a book and has published more than 40 peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports and evaluations about education and public policy.

While working toward his master's degree in public affairs and a Ph.D. in political science at Wisconsin, Carlson had a front-row seat to the nation's oldest education voucher program.

Created in 1990, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program offered state funds for private school tuition to lower-income families whose children attended low-performing, urban schools. It began with fewer than 400 students enrolled in seven private schools. Over the next few decades, parental income limits were consistently increased, and lawmakers created new programs that expanded the geographic scope of vouchers. This year, more than 52,000 Wisconsin students are enrolled in

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voucher programs, he says. Among them are religious schools that are a flashpoint in many voucher debates.

Private schools are less regulated and have fewer state and federal requirements than public schools, making it more difficult to measure the success of voucher programs and for families to decide which option is best for their kids, Carlson says.

Some studies on voucher programs in U.S. cities and states have indicated a slight advantage in high school graduation and college attendance rates for students who used vouchers to go to private schools, he says. The “competitive effect” that voucher proponents believe will improve public education has been equally modest in impact.

In Wisconsin, a small number of lower-income students use their voucher to attend high-achieving private schools—those typically attended by students whose families can afford the tuition on their own. But because these schools don’t need supplemental state funding, they can opt out of participating in voucher programs. Such realities reduce the option of top-tier schools for families that can’t afford tuition without supplemental vouchers, Carlson says.

Another potential pitfall, he explains, is the arrival of new schools whose priority is making a profit rather than educating students.

“One of the appealing things about the public school system is there’s a baseline level of quality that you can expect, because there’s a set of state standards,” Carlson says. “When you shift to the private-school sector, there’s the possibility of educational entities arising just to capture public dollars without a whole lot of concern for the quality of the education they’re delivering.”

Recent studies reveal that student test scores at such “pop-up” private schools in Indiana, Ohio and Louisiana have declined substantially, he says. In Wisconsin, data shows that the average school with more

than 80 percent of students using vouchers closed down within four years.

Carlson’s own forthcoming research will focus on the “supply side” of the voucher issue.

“When you open up a new source of revenue, how does the private educational system respond, whether that’s by creating new schools or even increasing tuition in light of demand? I think that’s a really interesting question.”

Last year, Arizona expanded scholarships to subsidize costs incurred by families who opt completely out of public schools, creating the largest voucher plan in the country, Carlson says. Families statewide can receive \$7,000 a year per child to spend on private school tuition, as well as home-schooler materials, tutoring and other learning expenses.

By comparison, an extracurricular voucher program for Ohio families provides \$500 for tutoring, language and music classes, curriculum, camps and field trips for home-schoolers.

Those are examples of what the school choice movement calls “education savings accounts,” or ESAs, which bring high risk without guardrails to ensure responsible spending, Carlson says. Families can spend ESA money on tuition and other educational expenditures that are often loosely defined.

The implied trust and freedom associated with programs that pay families directly is unprecedented, which, he says, exists in “almost no other realm.”

Carlson points to federal food, housing and medical assistance programs that come with a plethora of requirements intended to prevent fraud or misspending of public money.

“In my view, we need to have some guardrails to ensure a baseline level of quality when we’re talking about taxpayer dollars.”

## **THE RURAL/URBAN DIVIDE**

The politics around school-choice legislation isn’t strictly determined by party affil-

iation. Joining Democrats, who generally oppose these bills, are rural Republicans.

“People don’t think about rural schools when they’re discussing education policy,” Carlson says. “Rural schools in many states face fiscal challenges. The financial uncertainty accompanying voucher programs leaves many rural representatives worried.”

While rural families might have equal access to private-school assistance, there are few, if any, private schools nearby to take the money, he says. That reality has led to lawmakers rejecting statewide voucher programs in many states, though proponents say tuition assistance through vouchers or other incentives such as tax credits would entice new private schools to open across their states.

However, Carlson says there are “unresolved questions,” such as the lack of educational choices in rural communities—where open transfers among public schools may be the only real option for families—and price gaps between high-quality private school tuition and the financial benefits of vouchers or other incentives.

The OU professor lives in Norman with his wife and two children, who attend public schools. Carlson has spent decades studying education policy, but he’s also a sports dad who helps get kids to practice and plan his family’s dinner menu.

Though a private school graduate himself, Carlson says he’s happy with his children’s schools and that vouchers or other incentives wouldn’t induce him to send his kids elsewhere.

“We’ve developed the U.S. educational system over the course of 150 years,” he says. “That can lead to difficulties in achieving innovation and change, but it has also led to a really solid foundation.”

*Whitney Bryen is a multimedia journalist who writes for Oklahoma Watch.*