

## SPOTLIGHT



—Edmund D. Fountain for Education Week-File

Quinata Vaughn, a New Orleans hotel worker, and daughter, Quindra, do homework in their home. Vaughn got advice on supporting Quindra's schooling through EdNavigator, whose advisers meet with parents at their workplaces.

## PARENT ENGAGEMENT

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Schools across the country are building stronger ties with parents in an effort to boost opportunity for all students. In this Spotlight, learn how parents are providing valuable feedback on school improvement, advocating for students with disabilities, and the complex issues facing families and policymakers on school choice.

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# A District Turns to Parents to Help It Improve

By Denisa R. Superville

**M**ahamed Cali, a Minneapolis parent, had heard firsthand from fellow Somali parents how frustrated they felt that many interactions with their children's schools were negative.

He knew there were not enough interpreters and translators to help them understand what was happening at school and to make informed decisions. When they did hear from schools, the messages were often about their child being absent, or failing. When the school requested a conference with them, the meetings were set for the daytime, without regard for whether parents were working or had to arrange for child care.

So when the Minneapolis district last year announced it was seeking help to improve its relationship with parents, Cali saw an opportunity to make a difference.

"There's a lot of misunderstanding between the public schools and Somali parents," Cali said.

To change that dynamic, the district has enlisted some essential allies. Cali, and other parents from five Minneapolis communities—Somali, Native American, African American, Hispanic, and Hmong—have become frontline gatherers of insight in their respective communities. The district's larger aim is to improve its weak track record on serving students of color and immigrant students, as well as their parents.

Drawing on deep connections they have in their own communities, Cali and the other parents are using a range of techniques—surveys, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups—to collect information from fellow parents.

In a way, they act as researchers for the district, navigating community spaces that district evaluators do not always enter or where they may be viewed with skepticism, including in mosques, living rooms, churches, Zumba classes, Hispanic- and Somali-owned stores, community centers, and listservs.

"Our community is oral and trusting," said Cali, who is also the executive director of a Somali-American radio station. "[If] they know each other, they'll always speak openly; if they don't know you, your



—Ackerman+Gruber for Education Week

question, and where you come from, it's hard to get the answer you need."

The goal is not only to change how the district engages with parents, but to get better information that it can use to make decisions about students' education, said Eric Moore, the chief of academics and accountability, research, and equity.

"I want to make sure that this isn't [seen] as a program," Moore said. "It's more of a mechanism for system change. We wanted the parents to also equally own the process of research, so that they can help us understand through their own perspectives what are the best ways of understanding the phenomenon that impacts their children. Because sometimes as people who work within a system, we look at things just from our own lens, and that lens at times can become institutionalized."

## Parent Evaluators

For one, by using parents the district is flipping the concept of who is regarded as an expert in the school system, Moore said.

Unlike the district's surveys that ask every parent the same questions, for example, the new approach has the parents formulating questions they think their fellow parents may want to weigh in on. They decide what issues to focus on, how

Mahamed Cali is a parent evaluator in the Minneapolis school district where he uses his connections in the city's Somali community to gather feedback from immigrant parents on their experiences with the school system.

to frame questions, and what research methods would elicit the best feedback from their communities. That allows them to capture nuances and concerns that are distinct in each community.

The Minneapolis parents are part of an initiative called "parent participatory evaluation"—a method that more school districts are trying to gather better data from a broader array of parents.

Advocacy groups and community organizers have long used this type of research method to train communities to collect data and devise solutions. School districts have been slower to embrace the idea, though Minneapolis is not the first or only district that's finding value in the method, said Karen L. Mapp, a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and an expert in parent, family, and community engagement.

Doing so makes sense, Mapp said.

"I think for too long our schools have kept families on the periphery," Mapp said. "And now they're rising up and realizing that when they engage families meaningfully and that families have true voice—because they have a lot of knowledge about

their kids and the community—the solutions that are created are a lot more authentic and are a lot more in alignment with what the community needs.”

While the method can yield smart recommendations, it’s not always easy for school systems to embrace.

School district officials, often with advanced degrees, see themselves as the experts. That can make them reluctant to share and relinquish power, Mapp said, explaining why districts may hesitate to ask parents to take on such a prominent role.

### Reaching Diverse Groups

In Minneapolis, where nearly 65 percent of students are black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American, there’s long been a glaring and persistent achievement gap between black and white students.

The district had also drawn federal scrutiny for its disproportionate rates of discipline for black students. In 2014, it agreed to a number of remedies to address that and other issues raised by federal civil rights officials.

The parent-as-evaluators program grew indirectly from that agreement, which asked the district to involve students in improving school climate and culture. It began training students on research methods to collect data on school climate.

Last year, the district voluntarily began to do the same with parents. Over several weeks last year and this past spring, parents learned from the district’s research staff about how to conduct research, what methods might be suitable in specific situations, and how to analyze and present data. They received a \$500 stipend and the district covered their child-care costs.

Minneapolis knew it had a problem reaching those critical demographic groups. When it conducted surveys, which were typically mail-home or online, white and more-affluent parents were more likely to respond than parents of color, low-income parents, and those who spoke a language other than English at home, said Maren Henderson, an evaluation specialist.

Some parent surveys had been done in multiple languages, but the expense of doing so kept the effort limited, Henderson said.

That meant the results—and decisions that spun out of them—weren’t always rooted in the best data.

“If we are using data collection methods in which large populations aren’t par-

ticipating, then we are really not making the right decisions,” Moore said. “And when we don’t have information, what you end up doing is you make the decision based on your own experiences, which may be biased.”

Recruiting parents to become the district’s information gatherers was challenging. Some wouldn’t agree to sign on until they got assurances that their participation would lead to real change.



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#### ERIC MOORE

CHIEF OF ACADEMICS AND ACCOUNTABILITY, RESEARCH, AND EQUITY, MINNEAPOLIS SCHOOL DISTRICT

To help overcome that distrust, the parents jointly created the rules and expectations for the project with the district, Henderson said.

To demonstrate its seriousness about the feedback parents gave, district officials plan to nearly double the budget for translation and interpretation services next school year. It’s allocating more money to develop art displays in schools that directly connect to students’ culture. It has created a new “cultural liaison” position in the special education department to work, in part, on improving communication with parents whose children qualify for special education services, some of whom told parent-researchers they are often not treated with respect.

“When you talk about what a district is prioritizing, it’s often reflected in their budgets,” said Ed Graff, the superintendent. “What they are getting from us is a commitment to honor their voice and to actualize that in our work and in our actions.”

But the district admits that some of the more systemic issues that parents highlighted will take longer to address. Among them: hiring more teachers of color and changing bus routes to ensure students are picked up closer to home, a request that came from Hmong parents. The district has hired someone to work on diversifying the teacher workforce, including working with Historically Black Colleges and Universities. It also collaborated with the teacher’s union to include language in its most recent contract that will give some protections against layoffs for teachers who are graduates of the district’s local teacher-recruitment program, who tend to be from more diverse backgrounds.

And for other complex issues that take years to work through, the key is being honest with parents about what you’re doing and giving them constant updates on the process, Moore said.

“It’s just ongoing communication,” he said. “If you say it’s going to take three years, people just want to know how it is going.”

### Eye-Opening Revelations

As the feedback and findings from the parent-researchers began flowing in, most came as no surprise, Moore said. But he said hearing the same experiences repeated across groups establishes a broader pattern that’s harder to push aside as individual anecdotes.

And some of the anecdotes parents captured revealed particularly hurtful stereotypes. While about 80 percent of Hispanic parents said they’d like to volunteer at their child’s school, some reported being asked most often to assist with cooking or cleaning and not classroom duties.

Minerva de la Cruz, who has two children in the city’s schools, became a parent-researcher to be a voice for other Hispanic parents, especially those who do not speak English. In her outreach work, she focused on unearthing parent comments about bullying.

She used focus groups and one-on-one interviews to get feedback, ultimately reaching 137 parents. She was shocked by what she found.

Seventy-six percent of the parents who responded did not know the district’s anti-bullying policies. Fifty-three percent said they had changed schools because there was no support or interest by school officials to address bullying. Forty-four percent said they did not know how to help if their children were victims of bullying, she said.



"I was thinking that parents knew about bullying—what it means, what to do with their children if they had this problem," she said. "They don't have any idea what they need to do, and that was very sad to me. I don't know [whether] the schools don't offer that information or if the problem is that the parents—that they don't have time to go to the school."

Now, she hopes the district will make clear it has a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, hold meetings with parents to ensure they know what steps to take if their child is bullied, and create opportunities for teachers and students to build trust.

Sarah Washington, a parent-researcher and longtime education advocate whose children attended city schools and a nearby suburban district, sought input on special education services.

"Parents just want to be respected," she said. "We want to be heard in a respectful manner."

The district has never had an initiative that openly engaged parents and where leaders are sincere about using the results to make changes, said Washington, who credits Superintendent Graff with this new focus.

She is already seeing changes to help parents understand the often confusing process of establishing an individualized education plan, or IEP, for students in special education. That includes the district's plan to create a series of short videos featuring parents explaining special education terms, expectations, and how to seek assistance.

Cali, the Somali parent, is heartened by what he's seen so far.

"I think we are coming together right now," he said.

"I don't want to say we've solved all of the problems, but at least they listened to us. We [took] one or two or three important issues [to the district]. If those issues are taken into consideration, I think we are heading in the right direction." ■

*Coverage of how parents work with educators, community leaders, and policymakers to make informed decisions about their children's education is supported by a grant from the Walton Family Foundation. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.*



—Phil Sears/AP

Florida state Senate President Bill Galvano listens to debate on legislation giving teachers the option to be armed. A new law allowing trained, screened teachers to do so goes into effect Oct. 1.

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## State Lawmakers Tackle Broad Basket of Issues on Parent Checklist

### Safety, data privacy draw fresh attention

By Marva Hinton

**S**chool security, the charter school sector, and student-data privacy were among the issues of interest to parents that drew significant attention from state lawmakers in this year's legislative sessions, the majority of which have now wrapped up for 2019.

Among the highlights, with at least 42 legislatures either adjourned or set to adjourn by the end of June:

- Florida, where Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis in May signed a bill allowing trained, screened public school teachers to be armed in the classroom. The new law, which went into effect Oct. 1, expands the state's so-called "Guardian program," which was enacted in 2018 in response to the fatal shootings of 17 students and

staff members at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., last year.

- Texas, where Republican Gov. Greg Abbott signed a bill that removes caps on the number of school personnel who can serve as armed marshals at any school through the state's school marshal program. That program was enacted after 10 people died in shootings at Santa Fe High School near Houston in 2018.
- California, which continued to wrestle with a package of bills aimed at reining in the state's charter schools and checking the expansion of that sector.
- New Mexico, where lawmakers sought—but failed—to put a moratorium on charters and to impose an enrollment cap on them.

- Montana, where lawmakers passed a bill to govern the activities of third-party internet service providers to protect students' personal information online.

## Wide Range of Bills

But the sheer range of bills—and the fact that parents are far from uniform in their own policy prescriptions for the issues facing public education—make any single scorecard for legislation elusive.

The National PTA, which describes itself as the nation's largest volunteer child-advocacy association, with more than 4 million members, focuses its legislative activity at the national level, including on issues such as federal funding for family engagement. That leaves it to state-level organizations to grapple with the specifics of proposals that can vary widely from state to state.

School safety is a prime example.

The Education Commission of the States reports that 396 bills concerning school safety were introduced this year across 47 states, and 65 of them were enacted. Many of those bills, 153, included provisions related to emergency preparedness. That covers such factors as building security and safety drills. More than 30 of them had been signed into law as of late June.

About a third of the school safety bills introduced dealt with school resource officers, and 88 of them related to guns in schools. Among those signed into law were a bill allowing private or religious schools to employ armed guards in Virginia, and New Mexico legislation designating that only local school boards can authorize law-enforcement officers to carry guns on campus.

"With the number of unfortunate incidents that have happened in recent years, state leaders are starting to see that they can take a role in addressing school security, and I think this year you've seen such a variety of approaches because states are still wrestling with what approach they should take," said Zeke Perez Jr., an analyst with ECS.

He flagged Florida's law as the broadest enacted so far this year.

"That one really encapsulates a lot of the different efforts that states are taking," said Perez. "It provides training to district personnel on conducting building safety and risk assessments. It has statements related to school safety plans, and those are many of the key components of [legislation] across the country."

In the area of charter schools, ECS was tracking more than 400 bills this year.

Some charter supporters like Todd Ziebarth, the senior vice president for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, call 2019 a mixed bag for charter legislation.

He points to actions taken in Florida, Idaho, Tennessee, and Utah as encouraging signs for supporters of charter schools. In Florida, lawmakers provided more funding for charters this year, and Tennessee legislators created a new statewide panel to hear appeals for those denied charter approval.

But Ziebarth argues the outlook isn't as rosy for charter supporters in Illinois and California with new governors that are not thought to be as supportive of charters as their predecessors.

"Charter school opponents for years have been introducing bills to put moratoriums and caps in place to reduce the number of authorizers, to change funding mechanisms to reduce money that goes to charter schools," said Ziebarth. "What's different this year is the political context in these states is different now."

He described the situation in California as particularly troubling for charter advocates. Lawmakers there were considering bills that would, among other things, cap the number of charter schools at current levels starting next year and eliminate the ability of charter schools to appeal to state and county authorizers petition denials by districts.

"These bills are not only a threat to new schools that might open up, but they're a threat to existing schools that might be facing closure now irrespective of their performance," said Ziebarth. "That's very concerning, and we're hopeful that we'll see a bipartisan coalition of legislators in one or both chambers that step up and defeat these bills or then the governor steps up and vetoes these bills if they get to him."

The California State PTA has a policy of supporting school choice, but the advocacy group's director of legislation, Lea Darrah, also said the PTA supports bills that would make sure that charter schools operate on a level playing field with traditional public schools.

"We would expect them to have the same amount of oversight as the traditional public school," said Darrah. "The bills that we did support were bills that were requiring similar oversight. They were not allowing loopholes that traditional schools cannot take advantage of."

In New Mexico, where a proposed charter moratorium and enrollment cap failed, the state affiliate of the National Education Association supported that effort. But Charles Goodmacher, the union's government and media relations director, said its focus wasn't really on charters this year.



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### TODD ZIEBARTH

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT FOR THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

"We did wind up with an overall increase in funding for the public schools of 16 percent overall, and teacher salaries went way up," said Goodmacher. "We were fighting bigger-picture fights this year."

And Goodmacher stressed that the gains in those areas will benefit charter school teachers as well. Lawmakers did adjust a funding formula to prevent some charters from getting more funding than many traditional public schools.

"We're very happy that the community schools are getting more funding and attention in our state, which we think should actually alleviate some of the demand that arises for charter schools in the communities where there is a community school," he said.

## Data and Privacy

While it's certainly not as controversial as arming teachers or regulating charter schools, lawmakers around the country also continue to try to figure out how best to protect students' private information online.

The Data Quality Campaign, a national nonprofit and nonpartisan advocacy group focused on the use of student data in education, reports that more than 300 bills had been introduced in 46 states that deal with how education data are utilized. Of those, 50 were student-data-privacy bills, and nine of them had been passed as of June.

That's a smaller number of bills dealing with student data than the group has tracked in the past, however.

"It's not because states think privacy is any less important," said Taryn Hochleitner, a senior associate with the group's policy and advocacy team. "Already, 43 states have [put] student-data-privacy laws on the books just in the last couple of years, so we think where states are really focused now is on the implementation piece of really creating these new student-data-privacy policies at the state level."

Those laws tend to fall under one of two camps. They either regulate the data practices at the state or local level or they regulate the activities of internet-service providers.

Even though protecting students' digital privacy tends to have bipartisan support, there have been debates over issues such as the role of service providers in data privacy and the extent of parents' rights in consenting to have data shared, said Hochleitner. "There are smaller debates within the broader privacy conver-

sation that maybe make the legislation move a little bit slower, even though I think people generally are on board with the importance of protecting privacy," she said. ■

*Coverage of how parents work with educators, community leaders, and policymakers to make informed decisions about their children's education is supported by a grant from the Walton Family Foundation. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.*

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## High Court Case Tests Faith-Based Use of Tax Credits

By Mark Walsh

KALISPELL, MONT.

A national debate that has simmered for 200 years—whether public funds may go to the coffers of religious schools—is set to take center stage at the U.S. Supreme Court in a case that originated in this small Montana city over a state tax credit for donations to groups providing private school scholarships.

The dispute, *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* (Case No. 18-1195), which will be argued in the term that starts Oct. 7, is potentially the most significant high court case for K-12 education in years.

A ruling in favor of parents seeking to use the scholarships at religious schools could affect state constitutional provisions in at least 37 states that bar the inclusion of religious schools in educational choice programs such as vouchers, tax credits for scholarship donations, individual tax credits or deductions, and education savings accounts.

The Montana program, passed by a Republican-majority legislature in 2015 and modeled on similar programs in 18 other states, is quite small, authorizing \$150 annual tax credits for scholarship contributions. Big Sky Scholarships, the only scholarship organization to emerge so far, provides \$500 scholarships each year to about 40 families.

Still, the families receiving the aid do not discount it.

"For many families out there, \$500 is huge," said Kendra Espinoza, a 47-year-old single mother who has two daughters attending Stillwater Christian School here and who is the lead plaintiff in the lawsuit. "Even though it is a drop in the bucket compared to the tuition, every little bit makes a difference."

Espinoza hopes to receive the scholarships in the future to guarantee that her daughters can remain at the school.

Most of the other tax-credit scholarship programs around the country are far more generous and extensive. The Georgia Goal Scholarship Program, for example, provides tax credits of as much as \$1,000 for an individual donor and \$10,000 for qualified corporate donors, and has scholarship organizations providing aid of as much as \$10,387 per student.

### Revenue Department Rule

The Montana tax credit was passed with an inherent paradox. The measure defined "qualified education provider" to include any private schools, but the legislature instructed the Montana Department of Revenue to implement the program in compliance with provisions of the state constitution that bar any direct

or indirect aid to churches or religious schools. The department issued an administrative rule that barred the scholarships from being used at religious schools.

That rule was challenged by Espinoza and two other mothers, and their children, under the U.S. Constitution's guarantees of free exercise of religion and equal protection of the law.

"For the state to say we cannot access these funds because my kids go to a religious school, I feel is very discriminatory," said Espinoza.

The families won in a state trial court in this northwest Montana city of 22,000 that lies in the Flathead Valley, which is home to 100,000 people and is the jumping-off point for visitors to nearby Glacier National Park.

The Montana Supreme Court ruled 5-2 last year that the tax-credit program violated Article X, Section 6 of the 1972 state constitution, which provides that the legislature and other government entities "shall not make any direct or indirect appropriation or payment from any public fund or monies ... for any sectarian purpose or to aid any church, school, academy, seminary, college, university, or other literary or scientific institution, controlled in whole or in part by any church, sect, or denomination."

The provision is little changed from the state's constitution of 1889, the year Montana joined the Union.

Montana was one of four states admitted under the federal Enabling Act of 1889, which also admitted Washington state and split the Dakota Territory into the new states of North Dakota and South Dakota. The federal statute required that those new states adopt state constitutions that prohibited proceeds from federal land grants from being used "for the support of any sectarian or denominational school, college, or university."



Such state constitutional provisions are known as Blaine amendments, after James Blaine, a 19th century U.S. representative and senator from Maine who in 1875 introduced a federal constitutional amendment to bar public school funding from being used for the schools of any “religious sect or denomination.”

The federal amendment failed, but 37 states have language barring aid to religious schools, with the debates over such requirements going back to the 1820s. But the federal Blaine amendment and those enacted in the late 19th century have long considered to be motivated at least in part by anti-Catholic feeling, a response to the waves of Catholic immigrants who objected to the Protestant nature of the public schools of that era and sought public aid for their own parochial schools.

The Institute for Justice, an Arlington, Va.-based legal organization that represents Espinoza and other families seeking to use the tax-credit scholarships in religious schools, argues that anti-Catholic sentiment was present in Montana in the 1870s and 80s.

“Discrimination and anti-Catholicism was a substantial motivating factor behind Article X, Section 6” of Montana’s constitution, said Erica J. Smith, a lawyer representing the Montana parents for the Institute for Justice.

The state and its allies fiercely disagree.

The state revenue department, which is defending the Montana high court judgment in the U.S. Supreme Court, says in a court brief that the framers of the state’s 1972 Constitution re-adopted the 1889 language barring aid to religious schools “out of broader concerns to protect public education funds from diversion to private schools, and it was ratified by the people of Montana on that basis.”

Dianne Burke, the executive director of the Montana Quality Education Coalition, a Helena-based consortium of public educators and groups, agreed that the state constitution was designed to support public education.

“I see that as a responsibility to the taxpayers as to how their money is spent,” she said. “Once state funds go into private hands, there is no guarantee they will be spent with oversight and transparency.”

Eric Feaver, the president of the powerful Montana Federation of Public Employees, which includes the state affiliates of both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, also rejects argu-



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ments that those who drafted the 1972 constitution were motivated by any anti-Catholic bias.

“This is a very Catholic state,” said Feaver, who rose up through the ranks of the teachers’ unions in the state. “If you read the proceedings of the 1972 constitutional convention, you’ll see that you had a bunch of Catholics who said we should not allow public funding for religious education.”

Proponents of school choice, he said, “are out to destroy public education as we know it.”

### Concerns on Ballot Measure

Advocates of tax credits and other school choice measures have long argued that the traditional public school system could benefit from such ideas.

Kris Hansen, a Republican state senator in Montana in 2015 who co-sponsored the tax-credit program, said supporters worked with national organizations such as EdChoice, an Indianapolis-based group formerly known as the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, on a range of school choice bills in Montana before 2015.

She said the measures were vetoed time after time by Gov. Steve Bullock, a Democrat who is currently running for president, including a similar tax-credit provision in 2013.

But in 2015, then-Sen. Llew Jones proposed the tax credit anew and suggested that he would push for a ballot initiative if a legislative bill was unsuccessful.

“We just worked it until we got it through,” said Hansen. “The idea was it

Kelsey and Dusty Jones walk with their daughter, Cali, at Stillwater Christian School in Kalispell, Mont. Three different parents at Stillwater are plaintiffs in a case to be heard by the U.S. Supreme Court over Montana’s tax-credit scholarship program.

would be a \$5,000 or a \$10,000 or an unlimited, dollar-for-dollar tax credit. But obviously, budget-wise, that’s a pretty big sell.”

Bullock allowed the \$150 tax credit to become law without his signature.

“It was made clear to me that if I didn’t allow that to go into law, they were going to run it as a referendum, and they had the votes already to do it,” Bullock said in a brief interview with Education Week in September after an appearance at AFT headquarters in Washington.

A referendum, if it had been held in 2016, would have turned out more Republican voters in a year when Bullock was seeking reelection. Bullock won by about 4 percentage points in 2016, even as Donald Trump won the state’s presidential vote by 20 points.

Hansen has since left the legislature and helped start Big Sky Scholarships, the lone scholarship organization accepting donations eligible for the tax credit. (Even though the Montana Supreme Court struck down the entire tax credit program, the program has continued under a stay of the ruling.)

While the state law authorizes as much as \$3 million in tax credits, the results in the first few years have been somewhat humbling.

“It seems like we’ve had about \$20,000 to award each year,” said Hansen, who



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believes that legal uncertainties over the program have hampered donations. Big Sky settled on a \$500 scholarship amount for the time being.

“Our board just has to evaluate how much money we have and give out as many scholarships as is feasible,” Hansen said. “We made the determination that a \$500 scholarship would be helpful to a family.”

### A 6th Grader's Legal Analysis

Some of the first families to receive the scholarships attend Stillwater Christian School here, a 425-student pre-K-12 non-denominational religious school founded in 1980.

Tuition is as high as \$7,735 for grades 1-8 and \$8,620 for high school, but the school offers variable tuition rates based on family need, said Jeremy Marsh, the headmaster.

On a recent morning, some students were dropped off for school by parents driving pickup trucks with farm equipment in the back, while others emerged from SUVs with canoes strapped to the roof.

Espinoza, who brought the lawsuit challenging the exclusion of religious schools, chose Stillwater for her two daughters, Naomi, in 8th grade, and Sarah, a 6th grader. Espinoza had homeschooled them until her husband left the family in 2011, when she had to go to work as a bookkeeper. Their home went into foreclosure, and the girls entered public school.

Espinoza was not satisfied with the local public schools, and she enrolled her daughters at Stillwater Christian.

“Initially it was the religious education and that values-based education that I wanted them to have,” she said, also citing the school’s challenging academics and spirit of camaraderie.

“You see the high school kids interacting with the little kids,” Espinoza said. “They’re not too cool for them. My kids have been mentored by some of the older kids.”

She works two jobs as an office manager and bookkeeper this year, after dropping a third job doing janitorial work so she could have some time to shuttle her daughters to their activities. Like other parents receiving various forms of financial aid from the school, she volunteers a set number of hours per school year. Her daughters have not yet received scholarships from Big Sky, but Espinoza wants to apply in the future.

Another plaintiff in the suit, Jeri Anderson, is a 51-year-old single mother whose daughter, Emma, is also in 6th grade. Emma has received the \$500 scholarships in the last two years.

“We’re not trying to take away from the public schools,” Anderson said. “We’re just asking for assistance on the same basis as parents who send their children to public schools.”

Emma Anderson has been studying the case herself, sometimes Googling unfamiliar legal concepts.

“I actually looked up the state constitution,” she said. “Although it says gov-

“Even though this is a drop in the bucket compared to the tuition, every little bit makes a difference,” says Kendra Espinoza, 47, whose daughters Naomi, 13, left, and Sarah, 11, attend Stillwater Christian School in Kalispell, Mont. Espinoza is the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit over the state’s tax-credit scholarship program.

ernment funds should not be going to a religious organization, I think they are going to the families of the children in the school. It is more funding the family than the school.”

Many legal observers predict that the conservative majority of the Supreme Court may be inclined to rule for the parents.

In 2019, the U.S. Supreme Court said Missouri violated the U.S. Constitution’s guarantee of free exercise of religion when it denied a church participation in a state program to improve the safety of playgrounds.

The ruling in *Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia v. Comer* was important in several respects, but Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. sought to limit its scope with a famous footnote that said the case was about religious discrimination “with respect to playground resurfacing” and not about “religious uses of funding.”

Two justices in the 7-2 majority for the outcome in the case declined to sign that footnote and anticipated a case involving free-exercise claims in public funding of religious schools.

The state revenue department, which declined an interview request, and its allies will file their merits briefs in November, and the case is likely to be argued in January.

Bullock, who supports the Montana Supreme Court decision, was asked whether he had any regrets about allowing the tax-credit measure to become law, given that the small program may lead to a major U.S. Supreme Court ruling on the no-aid principle. He said he did not, given the high probability a ballot measure would have resulted and lead to the same legal clash.

“I certainly hope it doesn’t change the landscape, but I didn’t think that ... it would have been good to be on the ballot either,” he said. ■

*Coverage of how parents work with educators, community leaders, and policymakers to make informed decisions about their children’s education is supported by a grant from the Walton Family Foundation. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.*



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# Parent of Spec. Ed. Student Spotlights Powerful Tool for Advocacy

By Christina A. Samuels

**O**klahoma education officials recently ordered the Tulsa school district to ensure that the individualized plans of all its special education students comply with federal law—an enforcement action that affects thousands of children and youths in the 39,000-student system.

And it all started with one parent who used a lesser-known complaint option under federal special education law that can yield fast and expansive results, if a concern is found to have legal merit.

Most people who know special education are familiar with due-process hearings, which allow parents to file a complaint with a school district related to their child's individualized education program, or IEP. Those cases are heard by hearing officers and can be appealed to the courts—even the U.S. Supreme Court, in the rarest of cases.

But the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act also lets individuals file complaints directly to the state instead of—or in addition to—filing a due-process complaint. The state has 60 days to investigate, and the findings are not appealable by either side.

Success rates for parents filing state complaints are significantly higher than when parents bring cases before independent hearing officers, according to a 2017 study of five states. Special education law expert Perry Zirkel found that parents prevailed before hearing officers in 24 percent of cases in those states. In contrast, parents received favorable rulings in half the cases they brought directly to the state, said Zirkel, a professor emeritus at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania.

Todd Loftin, the Oklahoma special education director, said his state sees about 30 complaints a year. He said that relatively few are like the Tulsa complaint, where parent Carmon Pool Drummond specifically said her concerns might apply to other “similarly situated” students.

“We feel that the state complaint in terms of the formal dispute-resolution



—Shane Bevel Photography

process is one that provides closure more quickly,” Loftin said.

That said, the state complaint process has limitations. States only look back at district actions a year from the date a parent filed. And in this case, that the state didn't order Tulsa to take any actions, such as compensatory education, for students who might have had poorly executed special education plans.

“I don't think parents and districts are ever happy with all of the decisions we make,” Loftin said. “Parents want a lot of things through their proposed resolution. But we try to be as reasonable as possible for districts.”

## One Parent's Story

The path to the Tulsa decision began when Drummond's 14-year-old son started high school this school year. A mother of three students enrolled in the Tulsa district, she asked that the names of her children not be used.

Her older son, assessed by private evaluators as being on the autism spectrum, needs special education support in reading, writing, and math, according to his IEP.

Carmon Pool Drummond holds a stack of paperwork she used to file a complaint with the state of Oklahoma, saying her son was not receiving appropriate special education services.

But his middle school teachers thought he needed to “grow up and take care of business,” Drummond said.

High school proved to be just as difficult, from Drummond's perspective. She said she struggled to get her freshman son an updated IEP. She said her older son also had some of the same goals, written in the same language, as her younger son, a 5th grader who has attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. And the goals for both seemed impractically broad. One goal for her sons was that “student will read and comprehend increasingly complex literary and informational texts,” but the IEP offered no useful way to measure progress, Drummond said.

At that point, Drummond said, she knew she had a few options. Her mother, a lawyer who used to specialize in representing parents in special education cases, provided her with a leg up when understanding her legal rights.

"I can go to mediation. I can go to due process," Drummond said. But the stress, plus the need to hire a lawyer, was a major barrier. Plus, Drummond said, "If I do due process, ... it's only fixing it for my kid." She suspected that the school district as a whole was using cut-and-paste goals for many children.

Drummond filed her complaint in late 2018. By December, her son's individual case was resolved, with the state requiring the district to hold a meeting to develop an appropriate IEP for him.

By January, the state started investigating Drummond's complaint on behalf of "similarly situated" students. It examined portions of the IEPs of 181 students who attended the same high school as her son. A state report released in March said that in interviews with the state investigators, teachers said that they used cut-and-paste to create IEPs, removed information from IEPs after they had been signed by parents, and held IEP meetings without an administrator or general education teacher present.

### Cookie-Cutter Goals

The IEPs reviewed by the state also repeated goals verbatim. For example, 152 IEPs had reading goals. The goal "stu-

dents will read and comprehend increasingly complex literary and informational texts" appeared 60 times.

Of the IEPs reviewed, 113 had "written expression goals," but more than a third of students did not even have written expression as an academic need. And the goal "students will develop and strengthen writing by engaging in a process that includes prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing" appeared 59 times.

In addition to reviewing all student IEPs, the state directed Tulsa to retrain staff members in appropriate IEP development.

"We know in Tulsa that we've got a great deal of work to do in order to better serve all of our students and in particular our most vulnerable students," said Devin Fletcher, the district's chief academic and talent officer.

And the report also means that the district needs to focus more on supporting special educators, Fletcher said.

"Not to make excuses, but we have significant turnover that happens across the district, particularly in special education classes," he said. "It's an opportunity for us to reflect on how we can better serve the adults, from a system level."

Julie Weatherly, who represents districts in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia in special education disputes, said repli-

cating the same goals from year to year and using the same goals for multiple students are common pitfalls that she warns districts against.

"I harp on those a lot, because obviously it takes the I"—meaning individualized—"out of IEP," said Weatherly. "And it is going to raise eyebrows that it has been cut and pasted from someone else's bank of goals."

Goal "banks," which allow teachers to choose prewritten academic accomplishments through a computer-based IEP development system, should be used sparingly, Weatherly said. The look is bad, even if the goals are somehow applicable for multiple children.

Drummond said she's pleased that the state has ordered changes, though she plans to remain vigilant on behalf of her children.

"I really hate being that mom who is harassing people all the time," she said. "But at least it puts attention to the fact that you can't just 'cookie cutter' IEPs." ■

*Coverage of how parents work with educators, community leaders, and policymakers to make informed decisions about their children's education is supported by a grant from the Walton Family Foundation. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.*

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## DeVos Tests a Rhetorical Twist On 'School Choice'

Recent speeches twin 'education' with 'freedom'

By Evie Blad

**W**hen one of the nation's highest-profile and most divisive supporters of school choice went on an interstate, back-to-school tour last month, she largely steered clear of using the phrase "school choice" at all.

Instead, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, who used school visits in six states to promote her federal tax-credit scholarship proposal, referred to "education freedom," a rebranding that suggests

options that go beyond being expected to choose a school—options like mixing and matching components to build an educational experience from scratch.

Amid polarizing debates over school choice, can new language move the needle on public opinion, especially among critics who've called for more attention to the needs of traditional public schools?

As candidates for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination and lawmakers in states like California have engaged in debates over charter schools—the pub-

licly funded, independently run schools that typically have been seen as a more broadly supported choice option—DeVos has continued to cast a more dramatic vision that aims further out on the horizon.

In addition to district-run public schools, DeVos's recent tour included several charters with innovative approaches, multiple private faith-based schools that enroll students who rely on public voucher programs to help fund their educations, and even a meeting with a Christian home-school alliance in Pennsylvania. That's in contrast to education secretaries from previous administrations, who largely traveled to public schools.

"Doing better begins by expanding freedom," DeVos said at a kickoff event at St. Marcus Lutheran School in Milwaukee, a city she called the "birthplace of education freedom" because of its long-running voucher program.

"This isn't about picking a school building," she said. "That's thinking too small. Instead, think about unleashing thousands of not yet imagined ways for students of all ages to learn."

## Federal Proposal

DeVos has focused her efforts on a proposed \$5 billion annual “Education Freedom Scholarship” program that would provide federal tax credits for scholarship contributions in states that choose to participate.

In speeches, she paints a picture of using tax-credit scholarships to custom-build an education, cobbling together elements like apprenticeship programs, home schooling, private tutoring, and part-time attendance at faith-based schools, or using services like private special education programs to supplement a public school education.

“If you don’t like to study behind a desk and learn better in a lab or in a garden or between skyscrapers, you can do that,” she told students in Milwaukee. “If you want hands-on experiences to help decide your learning pathway, you can have those. You should be free to learn in any way and in any place that works for you.”

DeVos intentionally replaced “school choice” with “education freedom,” on her tour, said Liz Hill, spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Education.

“Too often when people think of the term ‘school choice’ they think of picking one building over another building, or one type of school over another type of school,” Hill said. “But her education freedom agenda is much broader than that.”

## A Critical Response

DeVos’s efforts come as advocates for private school choice watch a potentially game-changing case before the U.S. Supreme Court that centers on state policies that restrict the use of public funds in religious schools.

The Trump administration’s tax-credit scholarship proposal, first unveiled in February, was cheered by some supporters who believe that students need more educational options. But the plan has divided even some supporters of private school choice.

The Heritage Foundation, a conservative Washington think tank aligned with many of the Trump administration’s educational priorities, said vouchers and tax-credit scholarship programs are better left to states, citing concerns that federal involvement could open the door to additional regulations for participating private schools under future administrations.

Civil rights groups and teachers’ unions argued that the proposal would lead to a reduction in tax revenues, hurting tra-

ditional public schools that are already struggling with too few resources. Rather than search for alternatives, officials need to focus on providing additional funding to public schools, they’ve said.

“Our administrators, educators, and community members work together to put our students first,” Rockford Education Association President Mel Gilfillan told Fox 39 as the union’s members protested at a public high school DeVos toured in Rockford, Ill. “We’re the ones who make sure every child has access to a high-quality public education, not Secretary DeVos.”

DeVos has been a lightning rod throughout her tenure. As Democratic presidential candidates seek coveted endorsements from teacher’s unions, DeVos is one of the Trump officials they most frequently mention. South Bend, Ind., Mayor Pete Buttigieg even ran fundraising ads targeting her.

“Her unpopularity has tarnished the very things she’s advocating for,” said Patrick McGuinn, an associate professor of political science at Drew University who has studied education policy and reform.

That’s despite some public support for school choice, he said. McGuinn noted a recent poll by the journal *Education Next* that showed a slight uptick in public support for charter schools, and other polls that show some stronger support for charters among black Democrats than among their white peers. Among respondents to the EdNext poll, 55 percent said they would support “a proposal

[to] give all families with children in public schools a wider choice, by allowing them to enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition.”

New messaging can help some people more fully consider an idea they may have otherwise rejected, said Rita Kirk, a communications professor at Southern Methodist University who studies political language and public opinion. Even controversial pieces of legislation, like the post 9/11 USA PATRIOT Act, use compelling language to sell an idea, she said.

“Let’s take the fence-sitters,” Kirk said. “If somebody were to say, ‘Don’t you want people to have the freedom to choose where to educate your children?’ I think your first reaction may be more favorable than unfavorable.”

DeVos has made similar pushes in the past, including a campaign to “rethink school” by considering alternative approaches to education. Her critics argue that private choice proposals aren’t realistic for many families. They accuse her of neglecting the public schools that most students attend.

“How can you tell if the Secretary of Education is an ideologue whose only goal is to privatize and profit off of public education? You’ll know when her back to school tour looks like this,” American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten tweeted.

And DeVos faced criticism from civil rights groups after HuffPost reported

U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos tours the Great Lakes Maritime Academy in Traverse City, Mich., during a back-to-school tour of six states that also included visits to charter schools, traditional public schools, and faith-based schools.



—Jan-Michael Stump/AP



that one of her stops included a Catholic school that accepts public vouchers but doesn't admit transgender students.

As DeVos pushes access beyond public schools, charter school advocates are under a brighter spotlight as well. DeVos is a vocal supporter of charters and has called for more funding for them, said Todd Ziebarth, senior vice president of state advocacy at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

"Obviously the downside is, given how unpopular she is, that there is that connection made, that knee-jerk reaction that folks on the far left have that 'Anything she supports, I'm going to oppose,'" he said.

Schools that DeVos visited anticipated some pushback, said Scott Bess, the head of school at Purdue Polytechnic High School in Indianapolis.

At the charter school, students learn through projects that push them to find creative solutions to big questions. Recently, students responded to world hunger by proposing ideas like harvesting crickets as a source of protein and an app

that cuts down on waste by warning users when food is set to expire.

Bess said he hoped the attention to his school would help other educators see its approach and believe it could be adapted in their own schools. It didn't bother him that DeVos used her tour to push for another model of choice.

"It's one thing to say we're all about school choice, but not that school choice," he said, adding that he is troubled by private schools that restrict students based on test scores or personal beliefs.

At St. Marcus Lutheran School, nearly all of the 900 elementary and middle school students use \$8,000 vouchers from the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, and the school raises an additional \$2,000 per student to cover costs, Superintendent Henry Tyson said.

### Swaying Opponents

A veteran of school choice debates, Tyson is doubtful that new messaging will sway some of its most entrenched opponents.

"There isn't currently a platform for even a sensible conversation about education because everybody is so polarized," he said.

How DeVos frames her plan may be a moot point, said McGuinn, of Drew University. Without adequate congressional support, the scholarship bill was "dead on arrival," he said.

And even as DeVos championed the ambitious proposal, she acknowledged that the president hasn't made education a big focus.

"He could talk about education more," DeVos told the Detroit News as she made a stop in her home state of Michigan. "It's not been the top two or three items that he has been focused on. There have been a few other things that have taken his attention." ■

*Coverage of how parents work with educators, community leaders, and policymakers to make informed decisions about their children's education is supported by a grant from the Walton Family Foundation. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.*

## COMMENTARY

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# To Hook Students on STEM, Start With Their Parents

Parents are an untapped resource, research suggests

By Judith Harackiewicz

**T**here's a fair amount of hand-wringing about how to get students interested and engaged in STEM subjects. We do know that the pipeline leading to STEM careers begins to leak in high school, when students are faced with decisions about taking advanced mathematics and science classes. Decades of research show that a key factor motivating adolescents to pursue these advanced courses is the perception of utility value. Essentially, if a student perceives that taking a calculus or physics class will be useful in daily life or in a future career, the student's motivation to take that optional class will increase. My own research with my



colleagues also demonstrates that understanding the future value of the subject matter can build student interest and improve performance.

More recently, my research colleagues and I examined the role of parents in communicating utility value to their children. It turns out, it's critical. Teachers, parents, and peers can all contribute to students' perception of value. But parents, who are often an untapped resource, can play a crucial role in their children's learning and motivation because they know what interests them.

In 2007, my research colleagues Chris Hulleman, Janet Hyde, Chris Rozek, and I began a multiyear longitudinal study

to test the effectiveness of an intervention aimed at encouraging conversations about utility value between parents and their teens.

The parents of 87 10th graders received a colorful, glossy brochure (“Making Connections: Helping Your Teen Find Value in School”). When the students were in 11th grade, the parents received another brochure (“Helping Your Teen with the Choices Ahead”). Parents were also given access to a password-protected website. But families in the control group received none of the resources. All the parents and their teens were interviewed during the summer after 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Eighty-six percent of the parents said they shared resources with teens. In 82 percent of the families, at least one parent logged into the website. We followed the teens through age 20, five years af-

ter the intervention started, when most were halfway through college.

Teens whose parents received the experimental intervention perceived math and science to be more valuable and important, obtained higher scores on the math and science ACT test, and actually enrolled in more math and science classes in 11th and 12th grades. These results are remarkable because they suggest that a relatively modest intervention with parents can influence important academic outcomes for their teens.

Our five-year follow-up suggests that these changes can be long-lasting and have a significant impact: Greater high school preparation (taking STEM courses and having strong ACT scores) was associated with increased STEM career pursuit at age 20. We also saw an increase in students’ STEM career interest and the number of STEM courses they took

in college. These findings are the first to demonstrate that a brief motivational intervention with parents can have large effects on high school STEM preparation, as well as downstream effects on STEM career pursuit five years later.

Theoretically, this research contributes to our understanding of value transmission and interest development. Practically, it suggests that teachers and parents can make important contributions to students’ math and science learning and motivation by focusing on its current and future value. The intervention developed and tested here is cost-effective, and policymakers and district and school leaders might consider ways to involve parents in promoting STEM motivation. ■

*Judith Harackiewicz is the Paul Pintrich professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.*

## COMMENTARY

*Published March 20, 2018, in Education Week*

# The Time Has Come to Empower Military Families With School Choice

A federal change in education policy could improve military retention

By Lindsey M. Burke

**I**magine being a young, enlisted member of the U.S. armed services. You’ve volunteered to put yourself in harm’s way. You’ve committed to being assigned to whatever duty station your service requires, and you understand that the commitment also requires sacrifice on the part of your family, who will follow you from state to state, year after year.

But you may not fully have considered the enormity of the sacrifice your children must make. They, too, will face an assignment: whichever public school is closest to your new home, either on- or off-base, regardless of whether it’s the right fit.

This situation drives military family conversations around the dinner table at night. It is of paramount concern to service members. Last year, 35 percent of



respondents to a Military Times survey reported that dissatisfaction with their child’s schooling options was a major factor in their decision to remain in or leave military service altogether.

Indeed, the schools attended by most children of military families don’t match the schooling options they would prefer. According to a nationally representative survey of military families that I co-au-

thored for the nonprofit EdChoice, which works to advance school choice, although just 33 percent of military-connected respondents said they would prefer to send their child to a public school, 80 percent of military-connected children attend public schools.

Put differently, more than two-thirds would choose something other than a public school. Yet that's overwhelmingly where their children have to go to school.

This month, Rep. Jim Banks, R-Ind., introduced a proposal to address this disconnect and ensure military families have a choice when it comes to where and how their children are educated. The proposal, and companion legislation introduced in the Senate by Republican Sens. Ben Sasse of Nebraska and Tim Scott of South Carolina, would provide education savings accounts of between \$2,500 and \$4,500 annually to eligible children from military families to pay for learning options that fit their individual needs.

Instead of assigning children to district schools based on their parents' assigned duty station, and then sending federal dollars directly to those districts, the proposal would allow military families to direct funding to any education-related service or provider.

These ESAs would allow families to pay for private school tuition, online learning, special education services and therapies, private tutoring, and any other education service that is a good fit for their child. Unused ESA dollars could even be rolled over from year to year, following families to their next duty station.

School choice is primarily a state and local issue. However, because the federal government has a mandate to provide for the national defense, the education of military-connected children has a special place at the U.S. Department of Education. The federal government spends about \$1.3 billion annually on a program known as Impact Aid, much of which goes specifically to the education of military children.

Impact Aid exists to provide additional funding for the education of military- and other federally connected children when a federal presence disrupts normal tax revenues. The purpose of Impact Aid isn't to fund a particular type of school as a result of lost property tax revenue for districts, but to fund the education of federally connected children. So, like the GI Bill (which is also federally funded), dollars should fund the student, enabling them to choose whatever education option is the right fit.

Skeptics of transitioning the federal Impact Aid program to a system of student-centered education savings accounts argue that it will drain resources from district schools that depend on Impact Aid to support their budgets.

First, six years of experience with state-based ESA options demonstrates that program uptake is gradual: Between 1 and 3 percent of eligible students are participating in education savings account programs in the four states with fully operational ESAs, according to a recent report from the Heritage Foundation (where I serve as a policy director).

Based on those figures, senior policy analyst Jonathan Butcher estimated the fiscal impact on a random sample of districts currently receiving Impact Aid funding if 1 percent, 5 percent, or 10 percent of children currently enrolled in a school in the district instead chose to use an ESA. He found that "districts would see changes to their Impact Aid funding as a total share of the district's expenditures of no more than 0.10 percent. For heavily impacted districts—districts that have a significant number of students receiving Impact Aid—the figures are similar."

Such a change to district revenue is well within the bounds of what schools typically experience as a result of normal fluxes in student enrollment. And while it would have a nominal effect on school revenue, the option could be life-changing for families in the armed services.

Through the Impact Aid program, the federal government has committed to supporting part of the cost of educating military-connected children. To better achieve that goal, funds should be directed by military parents themselves to whatever schooling option is the right fit, regardless of whether that's a public or private learning option.

Reconceptualizing how we fund the education of children from military families could ensure children have access to learning options that work for them, which would have positive downstream benefits to military recruitment and retention.

The time has come to provide education choice to military families. It is not just an issue of education policy, but an issue of national security. ■

*Lindsey M. Burke is the director of the Center for Education Policy and the Will Skillman fellow in education at The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank based in Washington.*

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