



Voters Across the Political Spectrum Gave Public Education Important Wins in the 2024 Election

People around the country split their tickets to support public schools and vote for Trump.

By Jeff Bryant November 18, 2024 12:36 PM

In a general election that was by-and-large disastrous for the Democratic Party, voters across the political spectrum united to oppose efforts by Republicans to privatize and politicize public schools. The wins mostly occurred in red states that voted for President-elect Donald Trump, who has [called for](#) shuttering the U.S. Department of Education, [accused](#) schools of indoctrinating students, [vowed](#) to privatize education, and [pledged](#) to defund schools that teach “liberal” curriculum.

School voucher programs, elaborate schemes that give parents taxpayer money to fund their children's private school tuition, had an [especially bad day](#) at the ballot box. Voters rejected these schemes despite their popularity with Trump, who [many experts say](#) will likely make a federal voucher program a priority in his upcoming administration.

"School vouchers [continue to fail](#) at the ballot box," says Joshua Cowen, a visiting senior fellow at the Education Law Center, in an email to The Progressive. "Voters in Colorado, Nebraska, and Kentucky shot down voucher schemes."

In Nebraska, voters [rejected](#) a [measure](#) that would have provided \$10 million in tax money annually to fund "education scholarships," also known as vouchers. Vouchers lost despite [backdoor attempts](#) by state lawmakers to thwart the will of the people, according to Leigh Dingerson, senior research fellow at In the Public Interest.

In an email to The Progressive, Dingerson says, "When opponents of [Nebraska's] original voucher bill [in 2023] gathered enough signatures to put a repeal measure on the ballot, the bill's sponsor, State Senator Lou Ann Linehan, whose daughter is a communications staffer for Betsy DeVos's American Federation for Children, scrapped the bill rather than let the public vote. She then introduced a revised form of vouchers that she thought would be disallowed from the ballot. Public school advocates once again hit the streets to call for a public vote. They got that vote and said no to vouchers."

Public school advocates notched another win in Kentucky, where 65 percent of voters [shot down](#) a constitutional amendment that would have allowed the state to spend public tax dollars on nonpublic schools, including private and charter schools.

As the Courier Journal [reported](#), "[Kentucky] lawmakers have tried to pass 'school choice' policies in the past, including a funding mechanism for charter schools and a tax credit scholarship [voucher] program. But both bills were blocked by the courts." In response, voucher proponents tried pushing through a constitutional amendment.

Their strategy to win voter approval of the amendment was to deceive voters, according to Dingerson. "The pro-voucher campaign led with the [preposterous tag-line](#), 'Give teachers a pay raise,' " she says. "It's hard to imagine the scenario under which a unionized teacher workforce in the public school sector would fare better if public funds for education were shared by the private school sector, where educators are typically paid less."

"Anti-public education activists and outside billionaires tried everything they could to win school privatization in Kentucky," Jason Bailey, executive director of Kentucky Center for Economic Policy, says in an email to The Progressive. "They spent more than any ballot measure in the state's history, advanced culture war themes with mailers that identified supposedly prurient books in specific local public schools, linked the issue to support for Donald Trump and Republicans, and even lied by saying the amendment would increase teacher pay and public education spending."

Despite anti-public education activists' sustained efforts, voters overwhelmingly [rejected](#) the proposed amendment.

In Colorado, voters rejected a constitutional amendment that would grant K-12 school children “the right to school choice” and give parents “the right to direct the education of their children,” as [reported](#) by Colorado Public Radio.

Once again, proponents of the amendment resorted to deception to win at the ballot box, according to Dingerson. Colorado parents already have the right to send their children to private and charter schools, she explained. A text sent to voters (which did not disclose who paid for it) falsely [suggested](#) that Colorado Education Association president Kevin Vick supported the measure. “He did not,” Dingerson says, “and voters didn’t buy it.”

In Houston, Texas, voters again mobilized to support public schools. In the [largest](#) school district in the Lone Star State and eighth largest in the nation, voters [defeated](#) a bond referendum to allocate \$4.4 billion for schools—not because they objected to increasing funds for public education, but because they objected to the recent [state takeover](#) of Houston public schools that imposed new leadership, a move that has [alienated](#) teachers and parents.

Critics argue that the takeover is really about [privatizing their schools](#) and note that the state-installed superintendent is the [former CEO](#) of a charter school network.

Organizing under the banner “[No Trust, No Bond](#),” Houston public school advocates saw their campaign against the measure as a protest vote to signal their rejection of privatization and their desire to take back local control of schools.

In North Carolina, vouchers and charter schools weren’t on the ballot, but the rightwing effort to politicize public education figured strongly in the race for the state’s top school official. That contest drew [national attention](#) due to the extremism of Republican candidate Michele Morrow. Morrow, who [homeschooled](#) her five children, called schools “[indoctrination centers](#)” and [called for](#) teachers to conceal-carry firearms in schools.

Tar Heel voters rejected Morrow’s rightwing views and [elected](#) her opponent, [Maurice “Mo” Green](#), an experienced educator and former superintendent of the third-largest school district in the state.

Florida voters [handily defeated](#) an effort to make candidates in school board elections statewide identify as either Republican or Democratic. This effort to politicize public schools—an animating cause among conservatives who want to turn schools into ideological [battlegrounds](#)—drew the [support](#) of rightwing advocacy groups such as [Moms for Liberty](#).

For public school advocates, these stories about voter support for public schools are good news, but they also highlight a cognitive dissonance when it comes to national politics.

In Kentucky, Cowen notes, the percent of voters rejecting vouchers was almost the exact margin of voters who backed Trump. “All 120 counties in Kentucky opposed vouchers, with double-digit rejections coming in 119 of those counties,” he says.

“The [Kentucky] amendment lost just as badly in our rural areas, which voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, as in our cities,” Bailey notes.

Yet when Trump takes office, he is [expected](#) to renew efforts to create a federal school voucher program and propose drastic reversals in federal government support and oversight of public education.

Such jarring contradictions over policy would appear to provide the Democratic Party with possible wedge issues it could use to pry away voters who support Republican candidates. Yet, Democrats frequently demure from actively opposing Republicans on education policy, especially on the issue of privatization.

For instance, Democratic Governor Jared Polis, who [founded](#) a charter school network, remained [neutral](#) in the fight over Colorado’s school choice amendment.

To public education policy experts like Kevin Welner, director of the Colorado-based [National Education Policy Center](#), these misalignments between voters’ policy preferences and the Republican agenda would seem to leave Republican lawmakers vulnerable.

“Voters have always rejected voucher initiatives,” Welner tells The Progressive. “And research repeatedly shows that vouchers are academically harmful.”

“Yet when rural Republican legislators support their public schools by rejecting voucher bills, the party’s big funders attack them,” Welner notes, a reference to rural Republican lawmakers who’ve been [targeted](#) in primary contests because they opposed vouchers. “But Republican voters themselves have joined with their community members in rejecting vouchers. Why are Republican party bosses and funders insisting that state legislators support an unpopular and harmful policy?”

One wonders if Democrats know the answer to that question.



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