

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

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By [Kate Queram](#)

Education is a thorny policy area, partly because it's a weird mix of federal, state and local funding and federal, state and local oversight. It's complicated, even without things like vouchers that further muddy the (already muddy) waters.

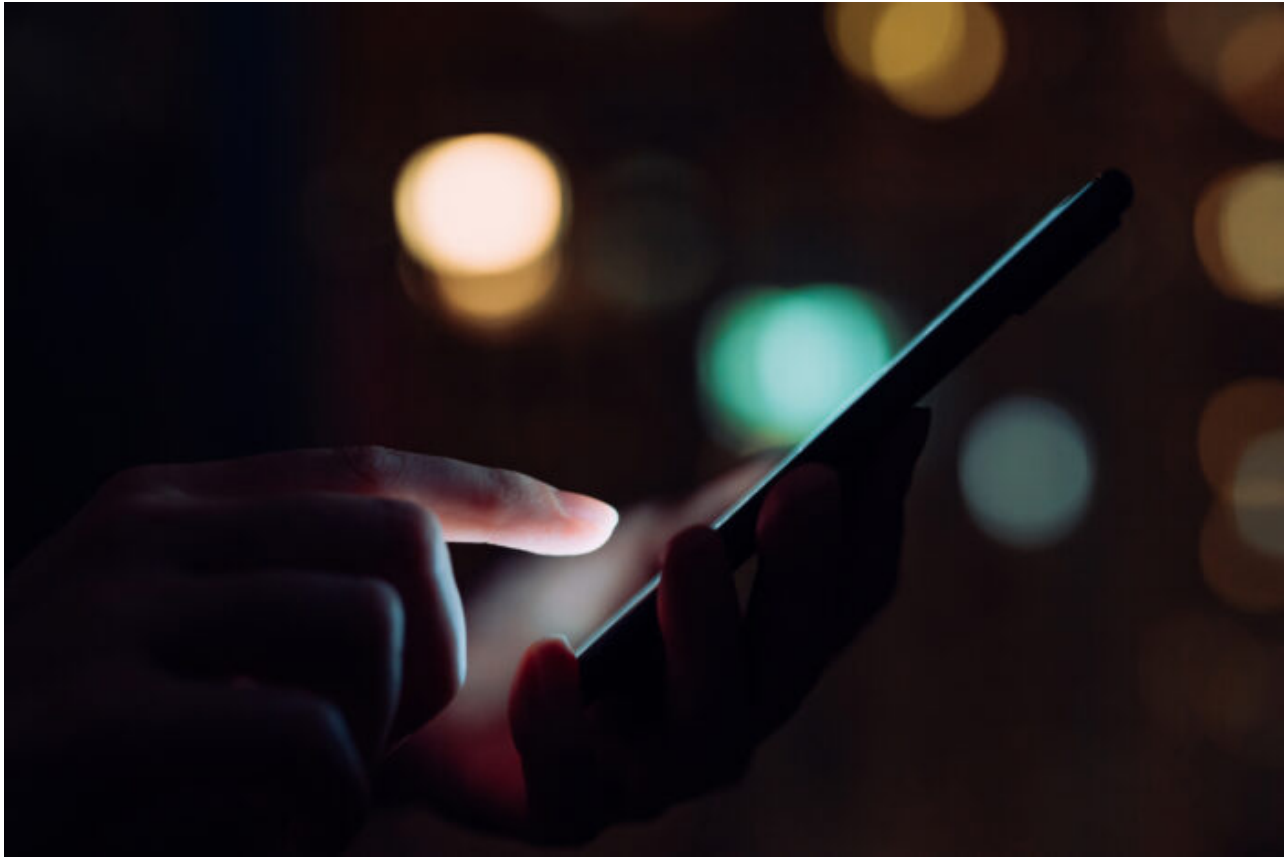


The Big Takeaway

Vouchers are a conundrum wrapped in an enigma cocooned in a question mark. They're simple, but they're also inherently confusing, based as they are on the contradiction of allocating public money to help students attend private schools. By definition, that means shifting taxpayer money to private institutions with opaque admissions policies and little to no oversight. This is all a long way of saying that vouchers don't really make sense.

They also don't work, though I guess that depends on your definition of success. Vouchers don't improve [academic performance](#), but they do reimburse [a lot of wealthy parents](#) whose children already attend private school. This has long been the goal of the so-called school choice movement, which began in the 1950s as [a "free market" proposal](#) that gathered support among parents hoping to send their children to religious schools and those opposed to desegregation. For decades, that effort has been bankrolled primarily by a quiet network of billionaires. But the push became more blatant this year in GOP-controlled states

like Tennessee, where dark money groups spent thousands of dollars backing sympathetic candidates in state-level primaries, [the Tennessee Lookout reported](#).



*In the dark, no one sees where the money comes from.
(Photo by Getty Images)*

Among their targets was state Rep. Bob Ramsey, a moderate Republican who opposed a slate of bills backing voucher programs and charter schools. His opposition was rooted in support for the public school system in his district, which operates on a tight budget that could be severely impacted if students fled to private schools. Ramsey's vote didn't derail the proposals, which were approved last year by the GOP-controlled legislature. But it was enough to place him in the crosshairs of a trio of education reform groups, which spent a combined [\\$91,849](#) on ads criticizing him or supporting his opponent during the 2022 Republican primary. He lost by [a huge margin](#).

"I think enough people got together and decided they wanted to get rid of me," said Ramsey. "They poked around until they could find enough inflammatory stands I took and then created enough of a smokescreen to make it seem like I was packing my pockets."

The money was a drop in the bucket for the reform groups TennesseeCAN, the

Tennessee Federation for Children and Tennesseans for Student Success, which have funneled [a combined \\$3.5 million](#) in independent campaign expenditures to state races in the last 15 years. Tennessee does not impose limits on those donations, so most of the money goes undisclosed, allowing [wealthy benefactors](#) to spend whatever they like. In Tennessee, that spending amounts to [\\$16.26 million](#), disseminated by 11 education groups via independent expenditures since 2009. The cashflow prompted a similar spending spree from public education advocates, who dished out \$10.88 million over the same 15-year period. In total, the state-level battle [cost roughly \\$27.1 million](#).



*That's a lot of singles.
(Photo by Getty Images)*

It's an absurd amount of money, and it will likely continue to grow. The education groups have different names and structures, but they're all backed by the same group of ultra-rich conservatives with little incentive to rein in spending as voucher programs [proliferate across the country](#). Public school advocates have a larger and better established base of supporters, but most are small donors who can't keep pace with billionaires, said Carol Burris, executive director of the Network for Public Education Foundation.

“If you removed all the people being paid to support charter schools, you would have just a handful of wealthy people left as supporters,” Burris said. “On the public education side, it’s thousands of teachers and parents.”

The public education side notched a win Tuesday in Ohio, where Republican leaders said they lacked the votes to advance a bill that would have required public universities to provide “divergent and varied perspectives” on “controversial” topics like climate change, “electoral politics,” marriage, and abortion. [The bill](#) would have also reduced the length of trustee terms from nine years to six and banned mandatory diversity training and financial partnerships with China, among other things, [per the Ohio Capital Journal](#).

The legislation passed the Senate in May but has languished for months on the House side amid endless rewrites and immense backlash from students and faculty members. Lawmakers are currently dithering over the 11th draft of the bill, which proponents framed as a compromise version due to the removal of a controversial ban on faculty strikes. But that wasn’t enough to overcome bipartisan opposition to the bill as a whole, according to House Speaker Jason Stephens.



Yeah, it's gonna be a no.

(Photo by Graham Stokes for Ohio Capital Journal)

“It doesn’t have the votes,” he said Tuesday. “I think there are a lot of concerns with that bill from both sides of the aisle, frankly.”

The announcement blindsided other Republicans, including state Sen. Jerry Cirino, who insisted his bill had “tremendous support” from House lawmakers, with the notable exception of Minority Leader Allison Russo, a Democrat who’s close to Stephens. Which, Cirino mused, might explain Stephens’ opposition.

“Remember, you have the speaker who did not receive a majority of the Republican votes to become speaker,” Cirino said. “Maybe there are concerns that he has over what others might think, other than the Republican caucus.”

Yeah, he probably just knows what the caucus *actually* thinks. Multiple members said Tuesday they “despise” the bill, either because they view it as anti-labor or anti-free speech (or both). Faculty members have similar feelings, according to Dr. Pranav Jani, a professor at Ohio State University.

“We’re glad to see that the ‘brain-drain’ bill may be on its way out,” Jani said.

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State of Our Democracy

Arkansas Attorney General Tim Griffin on Wednesday rejected a pair of proposed constitutional amendments that would tighten requirements for [absentee ballots](#)

and require the state to conduct elections using only hand-marked, hand-counted [paper ballots](#). In a letter dated Tuesday, Griffin cited several reasons for the decision, including conflicts between state and federal law, “‘partisan coloring’ language” and novel-length ballot language, [the Arkansas Advocate reported](#).

"It instead reads like a second ballot title," Griffin noted. "Although this alone is not misleading, you may wish to significantly shorten the popular name." If not, he added, "the use of semicolons would provide greater clarity and promote readability."



*Paper ballots, cardboard booths.
(Photo by Otto Kitsinger/Idaho Capital Sun)*

The rejections are only a temporary stumbling block for Restore Election Integrity Arkansas, [the group](#) behind the proposed amendments, which said Wednesday it had “anticipated” the decision and was “fully prepared” to revise the ballot questions and resubmit them. Should Griffin approve the updates, the group would begin collecting [petition signatures](#) from registered voters in hopes of qualifying for the 2024 ballot.

Both proposals spawned from the Big Lie, otherwise known as Donald Trump’s

deluded, baseless and ongoing assertion that voter fraud and conspiracy networks cost him a second term in the White House. (And thus was born [Trump 2024](#).) Whether they bought this or not, Republicans across the country seized on it as a convenient vehicle for their [voting restriction wish lists](#), which target everything from mail-in ballots ([oops](#)) to electronic tabulators, which are used to count ballots in [more than 90%](#) of U.S. election jurisdictions. There's good reason for that — namely, tabulators are not humans and are thus [better](#), and [faster](#), [at counting](#) — but Republicans are largely uninterested in reason, which is why they have [pushed to ban tabulators](#) across the country.

In Arkansas, that fight began with the Arkansas Voter Integrity Initiative, which has ties to Trump and favors hand-counted paper ballots because “people” are suspicious of “machines,” and, frankly, elections in general, which is definitely not because of Trump and his ongoing attempts to actively sow said distrust *oh my god*.

“A lot of it has to do with voters don't trust our system,” said Conrad Reynolds, the group's founder. “They don't trust that their vote is even being counted. We think that this would restore a lot of that trust.”

For what it's worth (probably nothing!), Arkansas already uses paper ballots; it just counts them electronically rather than by (error-prone, human) hand. Those ballots are marked by a touch-screen machine (which is not connected to the internet) and then returned to voters for inspection before being fed into a tabulator. The machines alert voters if they left a section blank *and* give them an opportunity to review or change their selections. And if there's a malfunction or a question (baseless or otherwise) about the results, officials can consult the paper ballots.

But they usually don't have to. An audit of 44,600 ballots from the 2022 general election turned up a single (1) instance of a discrepancy between a tabulator and a hand count. [Officials determined](#) it was likely a human error, due to a human placing a ballot in the wrong slot. (If it was the machine's fault, the technology's error rate would be .002%, which is officially too small for me to decode.) (And that is why people, including me, should not be in charge of counting ballots.)

In other words, it's “a very robust, good system that allows voters easy access, easy check in and works really well,” said Chris Madison, interim director and legal counsel for the State Board of Election Commissioners.

Which, to Reynolds, is a big whatever. Hand counts, baby. That's where it's at!

"I want to see more people vote; I don't care if you're Democrat, Green Party, Republican," he said. "I want to see more people participate in our system and I want to see the right person, the person who actually got elected, get elected, and I want to be able to verify it."

You can already do all of those things: [In face of threats, election workers vow: 'You are not disrupting the democratic process' ...](#) [Voter registration data shows California Republicans – not liberals – are flocking to Idaho ...](#) [Georgia lawmakers back at Capitol to redraw political maps to comply with Voting Rights Act ...](#) [Study: Kentuckians increasingly excluded from lawmaking process by fast-track maneuvers ...](#) [Campaign aides talk successes, failures in Louisiana governor's race ...](#) [Maryland board works to train election officials on threats before 2024 election ...](#) [Mississippi House Republicans elect Jason White as new speaker, Manly Barton as speaker pro tempore ...](#) [Pennsylvania redesigns its mail-in ballots for the 2024 election ...](#) [Dane Co. judge dismisses lawsuit against Vos over Wisconsin impeachment panel](#)



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One Last Thing

Copies of the latest royal family exposé were [temporarily pulled from shelves](#) in the Netherlands due to a "mistake" in the Dutch translation that included the

names of two people involved in an [infamous conversation](#) about the skin color of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry's then-hypothetical child. The book's author said he could only comment on the English version, which "does not name the two individuals." Dutch publishers said it was an "error." I am "kind of bored" by all of this, and yet also "sort of invested."

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