



The Secret Ingredient Behind the Year of Educational Choice

By Jason Bedrick

December 2021

Key Points

- Parental frustration over school closures, distance learning, and politics in the classroom created an opening for the educational choice movement, but those factors alone are insufficient for legislative success.
- States that succeeded in passing robust educational choice policies this year all had a key ingredient: an effective coalition.
- Effective coalitions have a unity of purpose, communicate regularly, and are well prepared to carry out their missions.

The *Wall Street Journal* declared 2011 the “year of school choice” after 13 states enacted new choice policies or expanded existing ones.¹ But so far in 2021, 18 states have enacted nine new educational choice policies and expanded 21 existing ones—the most progress the choice movement has ever had in a given year. And it’s not just the quantity that’s impressive; it’s also the quality. State policymakers have gone bigger and bolder than ever before, with more expansive eligibility and more innovative policies, such as K–12 education savings accounts (ESAs) that empower families to customize their children’s education. There is no doubt that 2021 is the “year of educational choice.”²

What was the secret ingredient of the choice movement’s success? Corey DeAngelis highlights the unexpected boost school choice received from teachers unions and the district school establishment.³ Virtual schooling gave parents a peek inside the classroom, and many parents were dismayed to discover the lack of real learning or how politicized

classrooms had become. All these factors likely contributed to the highest-recorded levels of support for educational choice ever—81 percent among the general public and 86 percent among parents of school-age children.⁴

But while these factors all created an opening, they were not sufficient for political success. Some states achieved substantial gains, whereas others stalled. Kentucky, Missouri, and West Virginia each have Republican supermajorities that passed their first educational choice policies this year. But Idaho, North Dakota, and Wyoming also have GOP supermajorities, yet they failed to pass any choice policies. Meanwhile, Maryland’s Democratic-controlled legislature fully funded the state’s voucher program for the first time in the state’s history, and Pennsylvania’s Democratic governor signed into law the state’s largest-ever expansion of its tax-credit scholarship policy.

The key ingredient present in the successful states is a coalition. The aforementioned factors

may have presented a rare opportunity to expand educational choice, but an opportunity is meaningless unless a coalition is present to seize it. Study the states that successfully enacted new or expanded choice policies this year, and you'll find coalitions that had been working tirelessly, often for years, before they achieved success.

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Take West Virginia, for example, which recently enacted the most expansive educational choice policy in the nation. The push for K-12 ESAs there began in 2016, when the year-old Cardinal Institute for West Virginia Policy first published a report on how West Virginia would benefit from ESAs.⁵ Success stems not from white papers alone, however. In the ensuing years, Cardinal deliberately built a coalition to advocate for ESAs. As a case study by the State Policy Network details, Cardinal first did outreach to those who would benefit from an ESA, including parents, homeschool organizations, and private school organizations.⁶ But it didn't stop there. Cardinal then "brainstormed non-traditional partners who might be interested in education freedom," including "church leaders and community organizations." Cardinal's Communications Director Amanda Kieffer explained,

A lot of state think tanks are so focused on politics that we forget the Junior League, the Masons, and the Women's Club exist and care about the issues going on in their communities. We're working on reaching out to those groups and trying to grow individual connections and further that community trust. Don't just stop at your Chamber of Commerce—try to think outside the box. It is the civic organizations you really want involved.⁷

Cardinal helped launch a new group of parent activists, Education Choice West Virginia, to inform the public about and advocate for ESAs.⁸ It also worked with national partners, such as EdChoice, Americans for Prosperity, and the Institute for Justice, to build their capacity and extend their reach.

This year, West Virginia state Sen. Patricia Rucker filed HB 2013, the Hope Scholarship bill. Sen. Rucker had been championing educational choice legislation for several years without success, but although she witnessed the defeat of multiple ESA bills, she knew she was making progress. With each "failed" attempt, the coalition grew and gained valuable experience. Each part of the coalition knew its role—publishing reports, writing op-eds, going on radio and television, engaging people on social media, mobilizing parents, and conducting advocacy at the state capitol—and the coalition coordinated its efforts effectively. When opportunity knocked this year, the coalition was ready to answer.

West Virginia is not unique in this regard. The huge educational choice wins this year in Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania were all the fruits of years of coalition labor. As advocates look toward the future, here are a few lessons learned from the most effective coalitions.

- **Unity of Purpose.** Effective coalitions are often politically and ideologically diverse, but they are united around a single goal and strategy. Less-effective coalitions too often get bogged down in squabbles over strategy and tactics or let differences over end goals hamper progress. In West Virginia, all coalition partners were united around passing an ESA policy for *all* children, and each coalition partner was committed to the same game plan.
- **Communication.** Effective coalitions are in regular communication. Depending on the time of year, this could mean monthly, weekly, or even daily calls or the use of online platforms, such as Basecamp, to share information, highlight needs, request assistance, and coordinate activities.

- **Preparation.** In effective coalitions, key partners have been trained and equipped with the best messaging, research, statistics, polling data, and other resources they need to successfully engage with policy-makers, media, and the public. Whether in the statehouse or on social media, they are prepared and persuasive.

One last piece of advice? Go big. Whether you're promoting an educational choice policy that's for all students or just a tiny fraction of them, the opposition will do everything it can to stop you. You might not get everything you're asking for. But if you don't ask for it, you're almost certainly not going to get it.

About the Author

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Notes

1. *Wall Street Journal*, "The Year of School Choice," July 5, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304450604576420330972531442>.
2. Jason Bedrick, "The Year of Educational Choice Is Here," EdChoice, July 1, 2021, <https://www.edchoice.org/engage/the-year-of-educational-choice-is-here/>.
3. Corey DeAngelis, "Teachers Unions Inadvertently Ignited the Year of School Choice," American Enterprise Institute, December 6, 2021, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/teachers-unions-inadvertently-ignited-the-year-of-school-choice/>.
4. Paul DiPerna, Drew Catt, and Michael Shaw, "Schooling in America: Public Opinion on K–12 Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic," EdChoice, December 15, 2020, <https://www.edchoice.org/research-library/?report=schooling-in-america-public-opinion-on-k-12-education-during-the-covid-19-pandemic#report>.
5. Cardinal Institute for West Virginia Policy, *West Virginia and Education Savings Accounts*, September 19, 2016, <https://www.cardinalinstitute.com/publication/west-virginia-and-education-savings-accounts/>.
6. State Policy Network, "Case Study: How the Cardinal Institute Built Coalitions to Pass the Most Expansive School Choice Program in the Country," August 4, 2021, <https://spn.org/blog/case-study-cardinal-institute-school-choice/>.
7. State Policy Network, "Case Study: How the Cardinal Institute Built Coalitions."
8. Education Choice West Virginia (@educationchoicewv), Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/educationchoicewv/>.

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