

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

BIDEN PLANS TO ROLL BACK TRUMP-ERA EDUCATION POLICIES

President-elect wants to expand resources for public schools and reinstate several civil-rights guidelines that were rescinded.

By Madeleine Ngo
November 29, 2020

As with environmental and immigration policy, President-elect Joe Biden has vowed to bring sweeping changes to education and to reverse some of the civil rights-related moves made under President Trump.

The current education secretary, Betsy DeVos, sought to bolster school-choice programs, proposed cuts to public-school funding and called for swift school reopenings during the coronavirus pandemic. Mr. Biden, meanwhile, has said he wants to expand resources for public schools and has pledged to appoint a teacher to head the Education Department.

"The DeVos administration has basically chosen to side on the powerful and not the vulnerable, not the marginalized," said Arne Duncan, former President Barack Obama's education secretary. "That's going to fundamentally change."

A spokeswoman from the Education Department, Angela Morabito, defended the department's current policies, especially on school choice, saying: "There is no one less powerful and more marginalized than the student trapped in a failing, government-assigned school with no way out."

Mr. Biden frequently points to his wife, Jill Biden, a community college professor and member of the National Education Association, the country's largest teachers union, to underscore his support for educators.

"For American educators, this is a great day for you all. You're going to have one of your own in the White House, and Jill's going to make a great first lady," Mr. Biden said during his presidential victory speech earlier this month.

Education policy scholars say Mr. Biden will need to give priority to securing education funding and providing guidance to schools for how to safely reopen if closed due to the pandemic. And while he has proposed increases in education spending, he likely will face challenges in Congress if Republicans keep control of the US Senate and with the Democratic majority in the House narrowed.

It likely will be easier for his administration to reinstate several civil-rights guidelines that Mrs. DeVos rescinded. Mr. Biden has also signaled he would be less supportive of charter schools than past administrations, prompting concern among some groups that support school-choice policies.

EDUCATION SPENDING

Mr. Biden wants to make community college tuition-free for two years and public college tuition-free for families making less than \$125,000 annually. He also supports doubling the

maximum value of Pell grants to roughly \$13,000 a year for low – and moderate – income students.

Throughout the presidential campaign, Mr. Biden said he would push to forgive \$10,000 in debt for every American with federal student loans to help them cope during the coronavirus pandemic.

Mr. Biden has promised billions in spending for public schools. He said he wants to triple funding for the Title I program, which assists schools with a high percentage of students from low-income families and receives roughly \$15 billion annually. He also wants to fund universal prekindergarten.

Those proposals will likely face challenges in Congress if Republicans hold on to their majority in the Senate. Two runoff races in Georgia will determine which party controls the Senate in January. If Democrats win both seats, Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, in her role as president of the Senate, could cast a tiebreaking vote.

Some progressives, such as Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, have called for Mr. Biden to forgive student debt through executive action, though it isn't clear whether such a move would survive a legal challenge.

CIVIL RIGHTS

Mr. Biden has pledged to restore Obama-era civil rights guidelines that Mrs. DeVos rescinded.

Under the Trump administration, the Education Department rolled back guidance that enabled transgender students to choose bathrooms that correspond with their gender identity. Mrs. DeVos also rescinded guidelines that encouraged the use of race in college admissions to promote diversity, and she revoked a federal guideline directing schools not to punish minority students at higher rates. Education policy scholars said Mr. Biden's administration could quickly undo many of those actions.

Mr. Biden has said he would end Mrs. DeVos's Title IX rules. The regulations, which drew criticism from victims-rights advocates, bolstered protections for those accused of sexual misconduct.

Undoing Mrs. DeVos's Title IX rules would likely take longer, since the Biden administration would need to overturn or revise the rules through legislative or administrative processes.

"There are a lot of ways in which the Trump administration has rolled back rights for students in this country. A lot of that deals with transgender students or students who have experienced sexual assault. So Vice President Biden will absolutely reverse those rollbacks in policy," Stef Feldman, Mr. Biden's campaign policy director, told reporters in October.

CHARTER SCHOOLS

Mr. Biden has promised greater scrutiny for charter schools, prompting worry among some school-choice advocates.

"I absolutely am deeply concerned that a union-controlled Biden Education Department could have a chilling effect on the progress that the states and parents have made in

securing educational options and excellence for the kids,” said Jeanne Allen, chief executive of the Center for Education Reform.

Mr. Biden has called for more stringent guardrails for charter schools, which are publicly funded but mostly privately managed, to access federal funds. He also wants to end federal funding for charter schools run by for-profit companies, which make up about 12 percent of charter schools, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

During the Democratic primary and general election, Mr. Trump touted his support for charters and school-choice policies, arguing that parents should have more flexibility to decide where their children attend school.

While the Obama administration supported the growth of charter schools and drew the ire of some teachers unions, Mr. Biden has formed closer ties to teachers unions, which have called for greater accountability for charter schools.

“He has been working closely with us over these last few months to listen and understand what the issues are that we are facing in this moment,” Becky Pringle, president of the National Education Association, said. “We know we have a partner.”

Some centrist Democratic groups have urged Mr. Biden to continue investing in nonprofit charter schools, which they say have strong support among minority groups.

“The data is consistently clear that nonprofit public charter schools, particularly in our urban communities that serve our African-American and Latino students, have performed well,” said Shavar Jeffries, president of Democrats for Education Reform. “For that reason, there’s also very strong support among African-American and Latino parents for charter schools.”