When given a choice, parents increasingly choose choice

Most state and national Democratic candidates have long sided with teachers’ unions, education activists and school district bureaucrats whose vision of public education remains mired in the system we’ve used for more than a century — and which resists almost any innovation that challenges the status quo.

Yet a new poll suggests that in one aspect of education policy Democrats should rethink their thinking. Not doing so could cost them — especially with key constituencies.

Education Next, an education policy think tank affiliated with the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, has released a new poll showing school choice initiatives are growing in popularity under the Trump administration. While Republicans have warmly embraced such programs for some time, the poll revealed that support for choice efforts is now strongest among black and Hispanic Democrats.

The poll refreshed results from a survey Education Next conducted in 2016. Respondents were queried about targeted vouchers, which the government funds to help low-income children attend private schools; universal vouchers for all families; tax credit scholarships for low-income families; and charter schools.

Boiling down the outcome, Education Next observed: “We find, somewhat to our surprise, that public opinion about several school-choice policies has shifted closer to the views held by Betsy DeVos,” who serves as education secretary under President Donald Trump and is one of the most prominent school-choice proponents in the nation.

According to the poll, which Education Next said involved 3,046 adults, including an “oversampling” of teachers as well as black and Hispanic Americans:

• Targeted vouchers. In 2016, just 37% favored providing taxpayer-funded vouchers for low-income families, while 48% opposed. By 2019, 49% backed them, while 41% disapproved. Among Democrats since 2016, support for these vouchers has jumped from 42% to 52%.

• Universal vouchers. In 2016, 45% supported allowing all families to receive government funding for private-school tuition, while 44% opposed. By 2019, 55% favored that, while 37% opposed. Among Democrats since 2016, support for universal vouchers rose from 49% to 52%.

• Tax credit scholarships. In 2016, 53% backed the idea of giving tax breaks to individuals or corporations that contributed to a scholarship fund that permitted low-income students to attend private schools — a program pioneered in Florida; just 29% opposed. In 2019, support for scholarships has climbed to 58%, while disapproval has dipped to 26%. Among Democrats, the ratio of support was unchanged since 2016. But many might be surprised to learn that it has held steady at 57% among Democrats.

• Charter schools. In 2016, 51% backed the “formation” of charter schools, which are publicly funded but managed independently of the local school board; 28% opposed that. In 2019, 48% favored charters, while disapproval registered 39%. Education Next offers a caveat, however. It notes that charters faced significant attacks early in the Trump administration. So in 2017, support had fallen to just 39%, while 36% opposed. Since 2017 support has rebounded by nine percentage points, while opposition has gained just three percentage points — which meant, as the group explained, “the potential collapse of public approval for charters that had appeared imminent in 2017 has not occurred.” Among Democrats since 2016, support for charters has declined, dropping from 45% to 40%.

But consider the results among more specific Democratic constituencies.

Among Democrats, the poll found that 70% of blacks and 67% of Hispanics support targeted vouchers; 64% of blacks and 60% of Hispanics like universal vouchers; 68% of blacks and 67% of Hispanics back tax credit scholarships; and 55% of blacks and 47% of Hispanics favor charter schools.

In other words, black and Hispanic Democrats exhibit stronger support for choice programs than the public or their own party in general, and rival that of Republicans. As noted, Hispanic support for charter schools is the only area of the four programs where minority support among Democrats lags behind that of the general public — yet that trails the public’s favorable attitude by just one percentage point, and still outpaces Democrats as a whole.

Meanwhile, backing for these four policies among white Democrats runs 46%, 40%, 33% and 46%, respectively.

So, in sum, Education Next’s results provide two key takeaways that present a dilemma for Democratic candidates, and an opportunity wise Republicans could exploit.

First, rank-and-file Democrats like choice programs far more than party leaders want the public to believe.

Secondly, the poll clearly suggests that on education policy a candidate could reap significant political hay by championing the idea of giving parents, particularly minorities, more control and options, whether with support from taxpayers or private donators, than aligning with the tired, entrenched fiefdoms that invest all authority in unions and bureaucrats.

Education Next has documented a profound shift in thinking. It’s worth paying attention to it.