



Defending Education President Nicole Neily Gives Remarks at the White House Roundtable for National School Choice Week 2026

January 29, 2026,

On behalf of the many parents who we work with across the country: thank you for the steps that this administration has taken to advance educational options for students.

It is remarkable that we're able to celebrate the creation of a federal school choice tax credit – an achievement that felt like an impossible dream 20 years ago.

It's worth pointing out that we stand on the shoulders of giants: Milton Friedman and Thomas Sowell championed school choice for decades, while groups like the American Federation for Children and EdChoice labored tirelessly to persuade state legislators to put families in the driver's seat of their children's schooling. Once these programs were created, they were attacked by teachers' unions... and the Institute for Justice, Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, and others stepped in to defend school choice in the courts. It truly has taken a village to get this far.

Under a system where families are assigned to schools based on their address, bureaucrats are provided a steady stream of per-pupil funding – while the actual “consumers” of the system (the families and students themselves) – have no choice in the matter and are treated as a cash cow, rather than a partner in a child's upbringing.

This was thrown into sharp relief in 2021 when students were forced into online learning because of COVID policies. When Zoom school was held in families' living rooms, parents realized how different today's schools are compared to their childhood schools – and were shocked not only by what had been eliminated from the curriculum, but what it had been replaced with. Identity politics permeated lessons from top to bottom, not only in subjects like history and social studies but also in science, health, and math... and woe betide the pupil holding a heterodox opinion on gender, race, affirmative action, or the Middle East.

Over the past five years, Defending Education has exposed discriminatory and politically biased programs, curriculum, and policies across the country in America's public schools. We've [sued school districts](#) that have tried to compel student speech in the context of preferred pronouns. We regularly publicize [reports](#) of schools racially segregating students and teachers into “affinity group” programming. We've uncovered districts that take race into account when [hiring](#) employees, and others that do so when [disciplining](#) students.

It's 2026. This is not ok.

Perhaps most insidiously, we've [identified](#) over 1200 school districts and counting around the country that maintain a policy of hiding a student's gender identity from their parents. Teacher training materials [obtained](#) from Eau Claire Public Schools in Wisconsin told district employees that "parents are not entitled to know their kids' identities. That knowledge must be earned." Yet families are forced to subsidize a system that hates them through their tax dollars, adding insult to injury.

It's little wonder that there has been an exodus from the public school system in the wake of the pandemic; an [article](#) in the journal *Education Next* noted that "[f]ive years after the pandemic's onset, there has been a substantial shift away from public schools and toward non-public options."

Alas, not everyone has the means to pay for school twice – once through taxes and then a second time out-of-pocket. Accordingly, hundreds of thousands of American families are trapped in school systems that do not align with their values and that undermines their parenting.

But thanks to the school choice provisions in the Big Beautiful Bill, alternative school options that might have seemed out of reach are now accessible. Giving families the ability to select a school that best fits their needs – rather than the needs of bureaucrats and administrators – brings families into the system and treats them with the dignity they deserve.

Unfortunately, many governors still haven't opted their states into this system, which would seem to indicate that they prioritize support from the education-industrial complex over that of their constituents... but I'm hopeful that more will step into the arena soon.

As Benjamin Franklin said, "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest." Madame Secretary, thank you – and thanks also to President Trump, Secretary Bessent, and the thousands of people who have worked for this moment. You are changing students' lives.

Sincerely,

Nicole Neily,
Defending Education
President and Founder