

Kentucky should follow Tennessee in expanding education freedom

Education-freedom opponents' campaign of denial and deception may have slowed the advance of school choice in Kentucky during last year's election. However, it's not stopping other states from offering their families additional opportunities to provide the educational options that best position their children for future success in life.

Ultimately, it won't stop us in Kentucky, either.

Neighboring Tennessee has become the 13th state to [adopt a universal school choice program](#). The program allows Tennessee families access to \$7,300 out of current K-12 funding to provide educational alternatives – including at nonpublic schools – for their children. The universal aspect of the program will be developed over time, as lower-income students will be at the front of the line. Ultimately, all families in the Volunteer State will be eligible to participate. The program will initially serve 20,000 families and includes a legislative mechanism for future expansion. It's a solid bill.

A major difference in the journey to education freedom in Tennessee and the defeat of Kentucky's Amendment 2 in November was the strong, determined voice of a supportive governor. Gov. Bill Lee led on this bill from the outset.

Like Kentucky, Tennessee had rural Republicans who voted against education freedom, claiming it harms public schools in their community. But it was [Lee's leadership](#) that shaped a more accurate narrative and helped overcome the opposition in the Volunteer State.

That's a huge contrast to Kentucky's Gov. Andy Beshear, who conducted a campaign of fearmongering expressed in misleading statements designed to pillory Amendment 2 last year. The amendment would have freed lawmakers to expand educational opportunities for Kentucky's parents – just like those now available to families in Tennessee.

Beshear claimed that offering parents the freedom to make a better educational choices for their children would destroy public schools, and that resources would leave Kentucky's tight-knit rural counties and wind up in

wealthy urban families’ pockets. The governor did all this while ignoring the [failure](#) of Kentucky’s public K-12 system to provide an acceptable education to more than half its students and three-quarters of Black and low-income children despite huge increases in spending.

<u>2022 Percentages of Below Proficient Students, Ky. and NAEP</u>		
	<u>Tests</u>	
	<u>% below proficient, Ky. KSA Test, 2022</u>	<u>% below proficient, NAEP test, 2022</u>
<u>All Students</u>		
Grade 4 reading	54%	69%
Grade 4 math	60%	67%
Grade 8 reading	56%	71%
Grade 8 math	63%	78%
<u>Black Students</u>		
Grade 4 reading	76%	85%
Grade 4 math	84%	91%
Grade 8 reading	78%	88%
Grade 8 math	86%	91%

Lee, on the other hand, positively collaborated with legislators to create a tight and understandable – but also ambitious – bill that a majority of legislators could support. He then became the bill’s leading champion in his state. His positive narrative replaced fear with the hope not only that more children would get the education they need, but also that the state’s public schools rise to become among the nation’s best.

The victory for education freedom in the state with which Kentucky shares its largest border inspires us to remain undeterred in our efforts to provide families with educational opportunities so their children have a hopeful future.

And, we reiterate: real education freedom policy will bring [positive change to our public schools](#), too. –*Jim Waters*