



Insight

Presidential Candidate Buttigieg's Education Plan

TOM LEE | DECEMBER 12, 2019

Democratic presidential candidate and current Mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg recently released his plan for pre-K and K-12 education. The level of detail in this plan distinguishes Buttigieg from the other Democratic candidates, who have largely focused on higher education. His [plan](#) has several parts:

- Tripling Title I funding for schools in lower-income areas;
- More than tripling funding for early childhood education;
- Banning for-profit charter schools;
- Boosting funding for states under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; and
- Increasing overall early education federal spending by more than \$1 trillion over the next decade, and funding the spending increases through a higher capital gains tax.

The U.S. K-12 education system needs reform, but it is not clear that Buttigieg's approach of injecting more money into the current system will produce improved educational results. A better approach would be to focus on much-needed structural reforms.

Boosting Title I Funding

Buttigieg's plan calls for tripling funding for Title I schools over the next decade. Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act—the second iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, following No Child Left Behind—is the largest federal K-12 education program. Through Title I, the federal government provides extra funding to states for local education agencies in low-income and high-poverty districts. The federal government appropriated \$15.3 billion for K-12 Title I funding in 2018, meaning funding under Buttigieg's proposal will rise to roughly \$45 billion per year.^[1]

Buttigieg has further proposed that his administration would focus on states that spend proportionally more on their public education systems than other states. Buttigieg's proposal to triple Title I funding matches that of Senator Bernie Sanders and is closely behind Senator Elizabeth Warren's proposal to quadruple Title I funding.^[2] ^[3]

The likely avenue for increasing Title I funding would be biased in favor of large, urban school districts. Title I funds are disbursed through four types of grants. The Education Finance Incentive Grants (EFIG), 25 percent of total Title I funds, is the only one of the four to determine its allocation based on how much a state contributes to its public education systems.^[4] The other three simply based their allocations on poverty levels, meaning Buttigieg's administration would favor increasing the proportion of Title I funds distributed through EFIGs. Prior research has shown that EFIGs tend to disburse more funds to large school districts relative to smaller school districts.^[5] Buttigieg's plan would therefore likely favor large urban school districts at the expense of smaller school districts.

Increased Funding for Early Childhood Education

Buttigieg proposes spending \$700 billion on early childhood education, which roughly translates to \$70 billion a year, with the primary goal being universal access to pre-K education. The main federally funded programs that provide subsidized child-care and education for pre-K students are the Child Care Development Block Grants, Early Head Start, and Head Start programs. The federal government spent \$19.8 billion on early childhood education in 2019, meaning Buttigieg wants to more than triple funding for these programs.[6]

Previous funding increases for early childhood education did not result in the programs having a greater reach, however. In 2018, the federal government spent \$8.8 billion on Head Start in 2018, a 22.2 percent increase from 2013.[7] Yet despite this increase in funding, enrollment numbers remained roughly the same.[8] This experience indicates that simply increasing spending on pre-K education will not necessarily lead to an increase in accessibility.

Buttigieg's proposal to make early childhood and pre-K education universal by increasing federal spending is similar to the plan put forward by Senator Warren to make pre-K education universal.[9] While Warren does not offer a specific sum her administration would spend, Buttigieg has provided more details.

Banning For-Profit Charter Schools

Buttigieg proposes banning federal support for for-profit charter schools, but he is not seeking to end federal funding for non-profit charter schools. In this way, he is keeping open his options on school choice, which creates a contrast with other Democratic candidates. Senator Sanders has called for a freeze in federal funding of non-profit charters, while Senator Warren has called for a complete end in federal funding of all charter schools.[10]

Nevertheless, Buttigieg's proposal makes him more skeptical of charter schools than the Trump Administration, which supports school choice and has not spoken out against for-profit charter schools. In 2019, the Trump Administration requested \$500 million in federal funding for charter schools, with Congress appropriating \$440 million, a 10 percent increase from 2018.[11] [12] Buttigieg has not indicated how much his administration would request in funding for non-profit charter schools.

Boosting Funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Buttigieg has also proposed increasing funding for students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The federal government provided \$13.5 billion in funding for IDEA in 2019, or about 15 percent of the average cost per special education pupil.[13] In the law, Congress originally promised to fund 40 percent of the average cost per special education pupil or about \$33.2 billion a year.[14] [15] Buttigieg proposes bringing federal funding up to the originally promised level. Other candidates, including former Vice President Joe Biden and former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Julian Castro, have similarly indicated their support to make the federal government fund 40 percent of IDEA.[16]

Funding through a Capital Gains Tax

Buttigieg's pre-K and K-12 education plans together would cost over \$1 trillion through the next decade. Buttigieg has proposed funding this new spending through a new tax on capital gains, although he does not provide details on how exactly this new tax would be structured or implemented. This funding proposal is

similar to the funding approaches of other Democratic candidates, who have proposed taxing financial transactions and the wealthy.

The Necessity of Reform

Over a decade of reforms has done little to improve student outcomes. The 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress found that only 45 percent of all 4th and 8th grade students were able to read or do math at a proficient level—a very similar result to the 2009 sitting of that test.^[17] Mayor Buttigieg deserves recognition for focusing on pre-K and K-12 education while others have focused on higher education. His policy proposals, however, would not create fundamental change in a policy area that desperately needs it. Simply increasing federal spending on primary and secondary education without making more structural changes would likely do little to improve educational outcomes.

[1] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_401.70.asp

[2] <https://berniesanders.com/en/issues/reinvest-in-public-education/>

[3] <https://elizabethwarren.com/plans/public-education>

[4] <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019016.pdf>

[5] <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019016.pdf>

[6] <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/federal-spending-early-care-and-education-past-present-and-future/>

[7] <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/article/head-start-program-facts>

[8] Ibid

[9] Ibid

[10] <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/deep-dive-bernie-sanders-elizabeth-warren-charters.html>

[11] <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget19/summary/19summary.pdf>

[12] <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget19/19action.pdf>

[13] Ibid

[14] <https://nclld.org/news/policy-and-advocacy/idea-full-funding-why-should-congress-invest-in-special-education/>

[15] <https://ednote.ecs.org/is-the-federal-government-short-changing-special-education-students/>

[16] <https://www.edweek.org/ew/projects/education2020/index.html>

[17] <https://www.americanactionforum.org/daily-dish/naep-nope/>