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Intersections:
Charter schools and federal power: What's next for education policy?

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PITA: Hello, and welcome to Intersections, the podcast where we discuss the different angles on a policy issue, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita. And with me today are Elizabeth Mann and John Valant, two fellows with our Brown Center for Education Policy. John's specialty is in urban schools, education equity, charter schools, and school choice; and Elizabeth deals with the politics of education and federal and state relations. Welcome to you both. Thanks for being here today.

VALANT: Thank you for having us.

MANN: Thanks for having us.

PITA: So now that the nomination fight over Betsy DeVos is over, the time seemed right to talk about what are likely to be some of the two major currents in education policy that comes next. DeVos's career of advocacy and charter schools was much covered, of course, in the last couple of months. And so given that that's likely to be a high priority for her, John, I'm going to be hoping that you can provide us some context on the charter school picture. And then, the question of how exactly much power she has as Secretary and the federal Department of Education has as a whole to influence states and districts is in question given the recent Every Student Succeeds Act, so Elizabeth I'm hoping that that's where you'll be able to set up that matter for us. And I just wanted to start us off—in the process of doing all this reading prep for this, I found a great quote that just sort of sums up a lot of things. It comes from education researcher Morgan Polikoff, and he wrote that "incoherence may well be the defining characteristic of Americans' attitudes toward our public schools."

(Laughter)

PITA: So that's a good place to start for what I hope will be a podcast that will help explain a lot of things going on with education policy.

VALANT: That sets the bar low for us too.

PITA: Right. Elizabeth, can I ask you maybe to start, please? Lay out for listeners what exactly the current landscape of federal oversight on education policy issues and what Every Student Succeeds Act was designed to do.

MANN: Sure, absolutely. So the Every Student Succeeds Act, which I'll refer to as ESSA, was passed and signed in December 2015, and that law really represented a pendulum swing back towards less federal authority and more state authority and autonomy. So in the broader context, that was really a reaction to the No Child Left Behind era which ended up being seen by many as quite heavy-handed and top-down from the federal government, where there were more requirements on exactly what states should hold schools accountable for and what those consequences should be. ESSA changes that dynamic and gives a lot of autonomy back to states. So under ESSA, states set goals for their schools that they need to reach. They decide how, you know, schools should be measured against those goals, what consequences there are for [schools] that don't meet the standards set by states. And this is all done within federal guardrails, they've been called, that are set out by ESSA, but there's a lot more room for states to kind of decide how to approach the goals set out by the federal government. ESSA also, in a couple of places, specifically restricts the Secretary's authority and is very clear about rolling back federal authority in several areas. For example, when it comes to standards the act specifically prohibits the federal government from pushing states in any direction towards adopting a specific set of

standards, and actually mentions a common core by name, saying, you know, the federal government can't require or, you know, incentivize or coerce states to adopt those standards. So on a number of dimensions, it really gives a lot of authority and autonomy back to states.

PITA: John, can I ask you to start for our listeners, to talk about a lot of the school choice and charter school landscape. I think a lot of people who don't follow the field closely can often be confused when we're talking about charter schools, because they come in all sorts of different shapes and sizes. There's for-profits and not-for-profits. There's independents and there's some whole networks. They have different pedagogies, some have different educational focuses. So when we talk about charter schools, are we all talking about the same thing? And when we talk about evaluating schools, the same question. Are we all using the same measures?

VALANT: Sure. So there is a lot of reason for confusion, and in fact there are actually polls out where people are asked not just what they think about charters but what they know about charters, and one clear takeaway from those polls is that people don't know very much about them. So it is just sort of a naturally confusing type of schooling. And essentially what charter schools are is they represent a different way of providing public education. So there are schools of choice, meaning that families, rather than being assigned to a charter school based on where they live, choose to enroll in or at least apply for that school. And then on the school side, there is at the core of this, what has been called an autonomy for accountability bargain. So schools are given more room to kind of do what they'd like when it comes to staffing and curriculum and the way that they operate their schools, in exchange for being subject to different forms

of accountability. So they are accountable to an authorizer, which is some entity that's established by the government that can decide whether the school can stay open or will have to close, and then they're also accountable to the parents because if parents aren't picking the school, the school won't draw in the money from the students' per-pupil funding and so the schools will close. And so what we've seen now is, I think at this point we have 43 states and the District of Columbia that have some form of charter school law that allows some charters, and they're really different across states. So charter schools are locally managed and run, and it's state law and state policy that determines how these schools look. And they look really different across the states, with a couple of the standard features being that they are tuition-free schools that are sort of publicly funded and privately run, and that have to use lotteries to determine which students are admitted and which students are not when more students request a place than there are seats available.

And then as far as, sort of, how they look with respect to what's actually happening in the schools—so if you kind of trace back the history of charters and what people were expecting, it's meant a lot of different things to a lot of different people. So some thought that it would be this really nice space for innovation where we would get really different schools that were emerging. We've seen that to some extent, but I think one of the critiques of charters that we've seen quite a bit is that a lot of charters, particularly in urban areas, tend to actually look pretty similar. And they look similar in ways that serve those schools' interests when it comes to performing well on state tests, which tend to be the kind of primary accountability metric. So there is definitely some variation across schools and how they look. There's a lot of variation across states in

how the policies are set up. But the schools maybe are not quite as different as they could be.

PITA: That is very interesting to hear because we—I think there's a lot of confusion in some of the pieces that you were looking at, those public opinion polls, about whether people have to pay tuition for it, about whether they can be religiously run, and those are different things.

VALANT: That's right. And so, the kind of common features: they're tuition free, they don't teach religion, they do bring in public money, they have some autonomy. But you see a lot of variation, for example, in who authorizes the school. So in some places it'll be a state, in some places a district, sometimes it's a nonprofit or a university. And then you see lots of differences when it comes to how much funding they get, and sort of what the rules and regulations are.

PITA: Okay. Elizabeth, during the days of the Obama administration, this whole question of does the federal government have more control or do the states have more control—I think a lot of people often thought of it as being a partisan divide; about Democrats are federal government, Republicans are either the House of Representatives or the state-level governments. But now that we have unified Republican control across the executive and the legislature, this is sort of breaking down in slightly different ways. In looking at ESSA and the state accountability factors, you wrote a piece recently with another co-author here about some of the steps that the Department of Education was taking to lay out the rules of engagement, basically, for states and how they dealt with accountability. And it went through this really long review and comment process, had a lot of buy in from the states—from both stakeholders and

from policymakers at the state level—to try and make that really a state-led process. But in this piece you wrote, you talked about how Congress recently introduced some changes there in a way that is sort of at odds with this whole idea about rolling power back to the states. It's sort of a technical, inside-baseball question, but I thought it actually had a lot of really relevant ramifications for education policy. So I'm wondering if you can tell the listeners a little bit about what happened and what, sort of, what happens next now.

MANN: Sure, absolutely. So this is a really important issue, and I'm really glad that you brought it up because I think it's one that is maybe flying under the radar a bit, particularly after all the attention that was paid to the confirmation process itself. So in the last year, the Obama administration went through the notice and comment process, they drafted a proposed rule that detailed what states needed to do in order to be in compliance with the accountability plan provisions of ESSA, and that process was pretty contentious. And so as you mentioned, during it, a lot of Republicans in Congress, you know, really pushed back against the administration for what they saw as executive overreach, which they saw as particularly egregious given that ESSA was, you know, designed in a lot of ways to roll back some federal authority. And so there was a lot of contention during the discussions and the notice-and-comment period over this accountability rule. The Obama administration—and again, you know, how people see this is going to depend on where they sit—but the Obama administration made a variety of compromises and then backed off on a couple of different provisions in that final rule in response to, you know, a lot of the pushback that they received during the notice-and-comment period.

So that rule was finalized, I believe, in November. And what's happening now, what you alluded to—so the House recently passed a resolution that would revoke that accountability rule using the Congressional Review Act. And so there's not a lot of precedent for this. Before the Trump administration, that act had only been used once to revoke a final regulation. And the consequences can be pretty far-reaching. So if you revoke a regulation using the Congressional Review Act, that agency is indefinitely prohibited from issuing a substantially similar rule. So it's kind of an open question of what that might mean for policymaking under ESSA without that rule in place, at least with respect to accountability plans. So the Republicans in the House that sponsored this resolution to revoke that rule frame it in terms of “the federal government overreached when they wrote this rule for accountability plans. We are going to revoke it and give states the authority that they're supposed to have.” Now, there are also people on the Democratic side saying, “Actually no, this accountability rule sets out a lot of useful points of guidance for states in order to facilitate them as they develop these accountability plans.” And there's concern that if you revoke that rule and there's an unclear process for what would take its place, that will cause a lot of uncertainty among states. Anne Hyslop, who was a former senior policy adviser in the Obama administration and works in the Department of Education, recently wrote a piece along these lines, saying that what this regulation does is it actually provides additional flexibility that's not spelled out in the statute itself, and it provides more clarity, and in doing so it might actually facilitate state innovation and might help states, you know, move a little further from the status quo in terms of accountability than they would otherwise. And so both—you know, people who disagree over whether or not these

rules should be revoked are, you know, both advancing these arguments about kind of state authority and state flexibility which I think can make it a little difficult to sift through.

PITA: John, on a similar level, a lot of the differences on school choice issues—while there is a partisan difference too, on Democrats or Republicans—there's also a big urban-rural divide within both parties. Can you talk a little bit about why that is, some of the differences in how charter schools operate in urban districts versus in rural or suburban districts, and so where that breakdown is happening?

VALANT: Sure, and we see differences there both in terms of why charters exist and who supports them, and then also in the effects we've seen. So this is another nice example of where charters mean different things to different people. And one of the political coalitions that enabled the early formation of charter schools was the coming together of some kind of market inefficiency-minded conservatives who liked the idea that you would see competitions, particularly in places like urban areas where you have a concentration of people, you have dense populations which allows you to put a lot of schools in close proximity. And they thought you could stimulate competition, and that you might see benefits from that competition. When that idea was unified with a more civil rights-oriented idea that charters and choice gave opportunities to families to choose schools other than the locally-zoned public school that they were assigned to, you had this sort of establishment of some urban charter schools and private school choice programs that really were the beginnings of what this was.

And so, what we saw was—this was in the early 1990s, it started—and we started to see quite a few cities moving toward having pretty robust charter school systems. So now, as of this past year we have—New Orleans is essentially all charter

schools at this, point when it comes to public school students; Detroit, more than half of its public school students are in charter schools; Washington D.C., it's at 45%; Philadelphia, 32%; San Antonio 30%. So there are a bunch of cities where we see there's a very high concentration of charter schools. And what we've seen in the effect so far, when it comes to student achievement and the effects on state test scores, is that urban charter school students tend to score higher than their sort of similar peers in traditional public schools—so district-run public schools. We don't see that in non-urban areas, and so—in fact it actually goes in the opposite direction, where it seems like charter school students in non-urban areas score lower than their peers. And so on the aggregate the results actually look pretty similar, where charter school students perform about the same as district school students, kind of across the board. The suspicions about why that is—so one possibility is that when you have schools that are opening up in New Orleans or in Detroit, it may be that the schools that they are being compared to—the district schools they're being compared to—are relatively low-performing, so it doesn't actually take much for these charters to outperform what would tend to be very low-performing public schools. It may be that they're just better, that these charter schools are better and they're drawing in more talent and that they sort of have some opportunities that other schools don't. Another possibility is that when charter schools are opening up in urban areas, they might tend to try to compete with schools in delivering the same kind of academic services at a higher quality. And in that way we might expect them to outperform or, sort of, to seek to do well on state tests, whereas when we see suburban—particularly suburban, but also rural—charter schools, some of them may differentiate not based on quality of academic instruction but on the types of

programs they have. You might see more arts programs or a particular math focus or something along those lines, where it could be that they're doing better and we just don't see it in test scores. So we get this kind of divide where it looks like, in the research that's out so far, that urban charter schools are outperforming suburban, but we don't know—we don't really know—why that is or what to make of that yet.

PITA: You had also written—there were some pieces that were looking at—in rural areas, there are often concerns about, whether it's a charter school or other private schools, if you're talking about a small rural town, about whether there's even just the basic infrastructure to support school choice programs. When you're talking about either greater distances, you know for instance, I think there was one piece that was looking at Maine and talking about, well there is a charter school, so in theory we could send our kids there, but it's 20 miles away and in the winter no one wants their kids on the road for 20 miles on Maine country roads in the winter. Can you talk a little bit more about some of those factors, as well, that are playing in rural communities?

MANN: Yeah, absolutely. So just in the context of the recent confirmation process, of course the two Republican senators that did not end up voting for Secretary DeVos, Senators Collins and Murkowski, are from Maine and Alaska which of course are more of rural states, and like you mentioned those were some of the concerns cited. And I think this is more generally a concern that school choice policies like voucher options and like charter schools are not necessarily a good solution for struggling or underperforming schools in these rural areas for some of these reasons you pointed out. And so, you know, kind of layering that on top of everything John just talked about in terms of, you know, kind of different evidence about you know geographically where

charters tend to be more successful, I think there's this other kind of practical, logistical concern, and that I think it will be interesting how it seems to play out given that, you know, obviously the Trump administration, Secretary DeVos are strong school choice supporters. But then what happens when you have Republicans, either at the federal or state level, who are primarily serving rural communities, for whom that's not going to be a good option for their constituents.

VALANT: And to that point—so the states where, I think there are 43 states and D.C. now that have charter schools—the ones that don't: Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia; they tend to be rural states. And part of that is just a population density story, that it doesn't make a lot of sense to open up one school next to another school when that school already is serving students who are really dispersed across a wide geographic area. And for school choice, whether it's in rural communities or urban communities, transportation is a big part of the story to whether or not a program succeeds. So if families can't get to schools, they're not going to choose them, and if you start putting a lot of schools in an area that doesn't have many people, you're talking about potentially having to go very, very far for families to get to school. So a lot of this really is just, you put the schools where the people are and oftentimes the people are not densely located in these rural states.

PITA: Elizabeth, I do want to come back to the Common Core standards that you mentioned earlier—that a common core was seen by a lot of people as another example, sort of, of federal overreach, when it maybe was too heavy handed. And so a lot of the question is, does Common Core still operate at all under ESSA, or in a lesser form? Can you talk a little bit about that?

MANN: Great question. Yeah, I'm happy to talk about that. So, first of all, so the Common Core standards, you know, I think there's still a lot of misperception that they were mandated by the federal government or developed by the federal government when in fact they were developed by a consortium of state leaders—so governors, chief state school officers—and they were adopted on a state-by-state basis. But within that context I think they quickly became polarized, particularly under the Obama administration, which had a number of initiatives including Race to the Top and including their waivers from No Child Left Behind, in which having standards—and I don't believe they named the Common Core standards but they referred to states being eligible for those programs if they adopt college and career-ready standards which was widely interpreted to mean the Common Core State Standards. And so I think that that's where this perception of kind of this top-down, you know, over-intrusive federal government requiring the Common Core for these different programs, I think that's where that pushback and that backlash came from. So now to your question, you know, what does that mean under ESSA? So ESSA, like I said, in particular, and I'm going to read here from a section of the law, it says that “the Secretary shall not attempt to influence, incentivize or coerce state adoption of the Common Core State Standards developed under the Common Core State Standards Initiative or any other academic standards common to a significant number of states, or assessments tied to such standards.” So the law itself is very clear that the federal government cannot, you know, tie having common core state standards to a requirement for any other kind of program. You know, they're very clear about that. But at the same time it is a state-level decision—it was, initially—whether or not to adopt the Common Core State Standards,

whether or not to use tests designed to meet those standards. And that remains a state level decision. So despite, you know, the rhetoric that Trump used during the campaign and that I think Kellyanne Conway also recently used about repealing the Common Core, the federal government cannot do that. So the Secretary of Education cannot require that states adopt them, nor can they tell states to get rid of them, or in one broad swoop get rid of the common core state standards at all. So essentially, you know, in a nutshell, it is up to states which standard to adopt and the federal government cannot intervene in that, and if that means that states want to adhere to the Common Core State Standards if they adopted them previously, or adopt them if they haven't before, then that's still a state-level decision.

VALANT: And on the politics of common core—so this fits the mold of a phenomenon we've seen a couple of times in education, where when people were asked about the Common Core they tend to be more pessimistic about it than when they were asked in principle about the idea of common state standards. And so we saw this also with No Child Left Behind, which was when people were asked if they supported No Child Left Behind hey did so at lower degrees than if they were asked about the sort of key tenets of No Child Left Behind, which might be part of the reason why No Child Left Behind was renamed as the Every Student Succeeds Act, which in a lot of ways sounds kind of similar.

And so, what some states have been doing with Common Core is they have been slightly changing something about Common Core so they can say that they've sort of put their own twist on it, but keeping intact what look very much like Common Core State Standards. And some of that may just be a political story, and this also might

happen with charter schools. We might find, as Trump and DeVos become the face of charter schools, that the term charter school comes to mean something different to people from what the actual idea and content of a charter school is.

PITA: So it's kind of like Kentucky. They basically adopted the ACA but they called it their own—the Connect Health Networks or whatever, just so it didn't get slapped with the Obamacare label.

VALANT: Right, exactly.

MANN: Yeah, I think that branding can be really powerful.

PITA: Ok. While we're talking about the Trump administration, on the campaign stump he put forth an idea of a $20 billion block grant proposal for school choice issues. Did he spell out what all was entailed in that?

MANN: So the short answer is no. There is no, as far as I'm aware, specific proposal for what that piece of legislation would look like coming from the Trump administration—although, you know, people have been talking about this a lot because in many ways it's the most concrete, you know, idea or proposal relevant to K-12 education coming out of the White House and coming out of the department at this point. So people have kind of speculated, well, what might this look like? And I've also seen some people try to understand what this might look like by comparing it to previous pieces of legislation dealing with a federal voucher program that have been introduced. And so, kind of without any specific details from the administration—so in 2014, I believe, the Scholarships for Kids Act was introduced, and similarly that was a bill designed around this idea of providing scholarships, you know, vouchers to students from low-income backgrounds. And so when that bill was introduced it didn't have

enough support to move forward, and so I think that the assumption is that you know, similarly, if something along those lines was introduced now it would also be very difficult to generate enough political support to actually pass that through Congress. So that's kind of what I've heard. John, do you have any—?

VALANT: Yes, so I'll echo. I agree with what Elizabeth said, that this was as specific as Trump got during the election, and still, this was a comment at a charter school in Ohio. There was no proposal that was posted online, we didn't really get details. So people are sort of guessing, and I think one of the possibilities that looks like it could be the direction they go is to use that money to support what are called tax credit scholarship programs. And essentially what tax credit scholarships programs do is they give both individuals and corporations tax credits for donations that they make to these nonprofits that then fund vouchers. So the key distinction between a tax credit scholarship program and a voucher program is that with a voucher program, the government's going have to find money. So Trump's going to have to somehow get Congress to allocate a bunch of money, which might not be in the cards. With a scholarship program, they could roll it into a tax plan more broadly and just sort of make this a big cut. So we don't know. There are different ideas floating around about how this might look. I have seen, in the last 24 hours or so, that there has been some talk about this new budget that Trump is putting forward. They say it in some way reflects the commitment to school choice, and we don't know what that means yet but there might be something beyond what has been sort of speculated about, but we will probably find that out soon.

MANN: And I think in the context of the budget, it's so hard to say what will end up on the negotiating table given the disagreements, even internally within the Republican Party—so between Trump and, of course, between Paul Ryan on what the budget should look like, where spending cuts should come from. And so I think, you know, moving forward, at least at this point it's pretty hard to say, you know, like John mentioned, what that commitment might look like in the budget and how it might change from you know the budget when it's introduced to kind of in the final stage.

VALANT: This is something, though, where—so if we've moved from that phase where we were not taking Trump literally to the phase where we are taking Trump literally—the $20 million to support some form of school choice was something that he said and came back to, and he has used very strong language in claiming school choice for disadvantaged families to be an urgent matter. So this is potentially something where we will see him move if he's trying to check off more of those campaign promises. And we'll see where it goes.

PITA: What were some of the reasons that some of the other previous attempts to get voucher programs at the national level established, why they didn't garner more support?

MANN: I think vouchers generally receive less support among the public compared to charter schools. I think it can be a little bit of a tougher sell if you're talking about public money being given to students who may then use it for private schools—so unlike charter schools, you might use it for a private school that is a religious institution. So I think it brings up a whole different dimension to this debate that doesn't necessarily receive as much of widespread support, because in part, at least, you're talking about

public funds going to private schools rather than public funds going to charter schools, which are public schools. And so I think that that's where some of that support might start to erode.

VALANT: I'd add to that to that, too. So—and this is true for charters but particularly true for voucher programs—is that they take students out of public schools where they tend to have teachers who belong to teachers' unions, and teachers' unions are really influential when it comes to setting education policy, and so to teachers' unions something like a voucher program represents an existential threat because it could be that you're losing teaching jobs for unionized teachers and those teaching jobs are being replaced in private schools, which typically don't have unions. And so we have seen very strong opposition from teachers' unions to vouchers and maybe in part because of that to Betsy DeVos as Education Secretary and to a lot of different forms of charter school proposals.

PITA: I want to jump to sort of specific examples of, in the case of charter schools, cities and states where they have been working for a while and that of what we know about it. And you brought up New Orleans earlier as being a city that is almost entirely now charter schools, I think they're down to only four or five non-charter public schools still operating. And in New Orleans, that was put into effect sort of in one big swoop after Hurricane Katrina, that they were all switched over. So they've had now a little more than 10 years of experimenting with this charter school program. Can you talk a little about what New Orleans has learned over the years, what were some of the different experiments that they did, and what they have seen successes in?

VALANT: New Orleans is this very unusual case of a U.S. city that essentially had its traditional public school system wiped away both figuratively and literally when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, which was horrible and it inflicted a horrible cost on the city of New Orleans. And what happened in the aftermath was the school system that the state—really, even more than the city—the state built after the hurricane was one of charters. So it is, at this point, almost every public school student attends a charter school and initially, and really currently, most of those students attend a charter school that is authorized by the state rather than by the district, which has led to some controversy and some conversations, and now that's changing and now they're moving control into the district. But what you have in New Orleans is this really unusual system in that no student is assigned to a school based on where that student lives. So every student who wants to go to a public school has to participate in this choice process, and the way that they do it for most schools is a family ranks its school preferences from 1 to 8, and they can include charter schools, a handful of other schools around, and also voucher-participating private schools in New Orleans. So they have this really integrated choice system and then there's an algorithm that assigns kids to schools based on families' rankings and availability in schools and some kind of priority groups. And what we've seen from that so far is, there is research coming out of Tulane University that shows that students, when you compare students in New Orleans now to either the students who were in New Orleans before the storm or to a kind of matched group of students from around the state, it looks like they're performing much better than they were before, at least with respect to state tests. And at the same time, we've seen a sharp increase in graduation rates in New Orleans that kind of outpaces what has also

been an increase in graduation rates statewide. But it's been steeper in New Orleans. So we've seen what looks like a kind of big jump. It's hard to know exactly what's going on there because it's such an unusual policy circumstance. We're not—we're not going to see that in any other city. And it's also the case that people want to know what are the costs of a system like that. So it may be that the schools that are emerging are very good at doing some of the things that we're measuring, but what about some of the things that we aren't measuring that maybe a more traditional system might sort of better be able to attend to? So I would say that's sort of—key takeaway so far is that it does look like there is some promise, in the sense that it does look like academic performance, graduation rates, some of the metrics that we should care about and that we measure they do look quite a bit better. But there's a richer story to tell eventually that I think researchers are just now digging into.

PITA: The New Orleans example also struck me as a little bit of a micro version of this idea of federal policy versus state-level policy. In New Orleans it's state policy versus local-level policy. Are there any other states that are having any sort of similar struggle—differences of opinion between the state government and local government about whether or how much to use charters or how they work—and what led New Orleans to turn control back over to the Orleans Parish board?

VALANT: Yeah, it's a great question. So we have seen this, in varying degrees, in other places, in Detroit and with the state of Michigan for example. And so what's happened in New Orleans here I think is in some ways fairly representative of what we've seen, which is states will tend to take over schools—and particularly urban schools—when they deem the performance in those schools to be unsatisfactory. And

when states take over schools, they can do it in a few different ways. They can start to run charters, which is sort of what the Recovery School District, which is a state agency in Louisiana, has done. They have a few other options available to them. When they do that, politically we've tended to see that people feel disenfranchised when suddenly a state is running your local school system, and why is it that the city next door gets to run its schools but for some reason we're incapable of governing ourselves? And so in New Orleans there was definitely some of that sentiment when it came to the New Orleans schools which was, “We’re 10 years out past the storm, we can run our own schools.” And New Orleans is now, with the state, in the process of transferring all of those state contracts—the charters that have been with the state—are being transferred to the city which is popular in New Orleans, and people think it probably is not going to immediately change the nature of the school system in New Orleans, so it'll still be charter schools that operate in very much the same way, and it probably won't change the kind of day-to-day operations within schools. Schools might not feel much of that change, but schools are ultimately now accountable to the city and the residents of that city rather than the state which is a healthy thing in a lot of ways.

MANN: And again to John's point that, you know, state takeover or management of local schools can be, you know, really unpopular or controversial. So John mentioned Michigan. So the Education Achievement Authority in Michigan, which was the entity that I believe was responsible for the underperforming schools in Detroit—so I lived in Michigan at the time this was occurring and I remember reading a number of news stories, and you know this was really unpopular at the local level for exactly these reasons, of the sense of removing local governance of this local public institution to

someone further away at the state, you know, disenfranchising local parents and local community members. And so I think there's absolutely this struggle, you know, at the state level between state and local that mirrors the federal-state struggle.

PITA: People are, of course, also looking at Michigan and Detroit pretty closely because that's where Secretary DeVos, previously, was primarily working with the Michigan area. What other lessons can we see out of Detroit and Michigan about how charter schools operated there, maybe compared to anywhere else?

VALANT: So it's very different. The Michigan charter school setting is very different from the country's, and primarily in that a far larger percentage of Michigan's charter schools are for-profit schools, meaning that they try to take in more money than they spend on kids, and they're sort of always paying attention to that margin and in trying to bring in money. That is not true nationally, we seen far more nonprofits running schools than for-profits. Whether Detroit's schools and Michigan's schools are performing well has been the subject of a lot of debate. And so Betsy DeVos is regarded as kind of an architect of Michigan charter school policy and Detroit charter school policy, and has also funded a lot of the programs that are in place there.

MANN: And advocacy, right, to—

VALANT: Right, right. And she actually has written an op-ed, too, that argued for totally taking apart the Detroit public school system and replacing it with the choice system. So she is very much involved in what's happening in Detroit and Michigan. The charter school evaluation that gets cited the most often is from a group called Credo at Stanford. It's actually the one I mentioned when I said that the results across the board look pretty similar across charters and traditional public schools. Their analyses of the

state of Michigan, so charters just in the state of Michigan and charters in Detroit, both suggest that the charters are outperforming the comparison traditional public schools. A lot of people will say that that may be, but the systems as a whole are not performing well. So it may be that charter schools in Detroit are doing better than traditional public schools in Detroit, but the system in Detroit is not doing well and so we should evaluate the system rather than evaluating just that difference between charter schools and districts schools. But that point is contended. So people believe different things about whether a model like that works. For-profit schools, and for-profit charter schools in particular, are very controversial and there are a lot of people who just dislike the idea that what have been public institutions that we rely on to serve really a whole bunch of different public purposes, would now take public money but exist for the purpose of profit; and that's something that bothers a lot of people for a lot of different reasons.

PITA: I think that leads to what I think will work well as a last question. And you also alluded to it earlier when you talked about why different communities, urban, rural, suburban, what they want from charter schools or from school choice programs—which is the question about what is education for and is education a public good? Is it there to create a basic standard of well-rounded citizens, making sure that every student regardless of income, race, disability, whatever gets that basic education? Or is education a private individualized good about is my child getting the very best that will enable them to reach their most maximum potential, their maximum success? Can I ask you both to weigh in on that tension between what the goal of education is and what people want out of education for themselves and their children?

MANN: So I think that there's a lot of new interest in this question, in particular because this discussion about school choice, with Trump's election and with DeVos's confirmation, has really brought us into a spotlight in a way that we haven't necessarily seen before on a national scale. So, you know, that may be a kind of an externality of all this process and in the sense that people are talking about this and thinking about this seriously I think that's a good thing. Now, I will say that I think that exactly this question is why a lot of people were so concerned and maybe even felt threatened by DeVos's nomination and confirmation as Secretary of Education. And so I think a lot of people, you know, kind of building on what John just mentioned about her role in building that particular charter school choice environment in Michigan, I think a lot of people wonder what her view of a public good as it applies to education is. And so I think that there is you know not necessarily trust that she sees education as this public good, and as a result there's not a lot of confidence that she's going to work to build out the public school system and address deficiencies within that system and make it as strong as it can be, but that rather she would, you know, work outside that system or try to fundamentally change it. And so I think that, you know, this is an open question. And I think in part that's why we're seeing a lot of contention around education and around, you know, the role of school choice in a public school system.

VALANT: I think the question of public versus private purposes in education is a wonderful one. I am doing some work on this now that's ongoing. To me the answer is that it does both. So our schools do serve the students who walk through the door in the sense that there are private purposes where we want those kids to learn, and be able to go to college if they want to go to college, and to get good jobs, and to live rich fulfilling

lives. It also serves public purpose. So we rely on our schools to support the functioning of our economies, and to give people a sense of democratic responsibility, and of how to treat one another. And historically we've relied on schools for very different reasons. So the early common schools in the US were created to build a common culture and a language and a sense of this democratic responsibility and values. And we needed that as sort of a thread to tie us together. And then the industrial revolution came along, we suddenly need schools to sort of support the economy and to get people so that they could they could fill roles that were required in what was a very quickly changing economy. Some believe that this is probably not just a phenomenon in education, but that we have moved in recent decades toward a much more private-minded view of schools. And so we've treated it as a commodity, that education is a commodity that should serve the immediate needs of the kids who are there. I think now, I mean, if you look at what's happening in the country right now and in this past election, it's not hard to make a case that some of those problems that we thought we needed to address early on with the way we were setting up schools, we didn't exactly solve, or if we solved them they came back to us. And so, really finding a way, whether it's within what is largely privatized system of charters and vouchers or it's in a more traditional public system, finding a way to attend to both those private needs of the kids were there and the broader public needs of American society I think is the question going forward on how we handle school reform.

PITA: All right. Well thank you both very much for hopefully helping to stem some of the incoherence on education policy.

And I want to remind our listeners that they can find the both of you on Twitter, and they can also follow Intersections as well as the rest of the Brookings Podcast Network @policypodcasts on Twitter. So thank you both for being with us today.

MANN: Thanks very much.

VALANT: Pleasure to be here.