



Amendment 2, the “school choice” amendment, faced a sweeping defeat in November. Kentucky’s student voices helped to make it happen.

writing by MAGGIE STONE • design by JEREMY YOUNG

Nov. 5, 2024, was a monumental day in U.S. history. It was the day that millions of Americans finally headed to the polls to cast their votes in a consequential presidential election. However, while most voters were focused exclusively on the top of the ticket, our state’s constituents had another decision to make. On the back of the ballot were two proposed amendments to the state constitution, both of which asked seemingly simple questions. The first dealt with voting rights for non-citizens. The second began with this:

“To give parents choices in educational opportunities for their children, are you in favor of enabling the General Assembly to provide financial support for the education costs of students in kindergarten through 12th grade who are outside the system of common (public) schools...?”

With its vague wording, it’s easy to misunderstand what the amendment is trying to say — so let’s clarify. The preface, which states that it will “give parents choices on educational opportunities for their children,” prompts readers to make a choice about whether or not they support parents deciding which school their child attends.

However, this not only makes the idea of voting “no” seem like the reader does not support education, it also does not explain the implications

of the amendment. What the statement omits is the source of the “financial support:” funds for public schools. In other words, voters were asked to choose whether or not they supported the use of public funds for private school students’ tuitions.

A group of GOP lawmakers originally introduced Amendment 2 as House Bill 2 (HB2) on Jan. 26. While marketed by proponents as an initiative for school choice, critics described it as an attempt to implement Kentucky’s first voucher program.

Still, supporters championed the flexibility of the measure, which would clear the way for a discussion involving not just vouchers, but charter schools and other tax programs benefitting private schools. Many viewed it as the solution to a flawed public school system, discouraged by headlines bearing news of teacher strikes, gun threats and transportation woes.

“Something has to change with Kentucky’s education system,” said Elizabeth Post, a representative for Kentucky Students First. “We believe that change comes when parents are given more choices for where they can send their child to school.”

When the votes were tallied, Kentucky made its position on the amendment clear. The answer, in a vote split 65% to 35%, was a resounding no. Even President-elect Donald Trump’s historic support of similar “school

choice” initiatives couldn’t convince Kentucky’s abundance of deeply red districts. By 6 p.m. on Nov. 5, not a single county cast a majority “yes” vote on Amendment 2.

However, this decisive vote wasn’t guaranteed from the start. It took the effort of hundreds of advocates, many of whom were youth, to sway voters to one side.

Protect Our Schools KY, a coalition of education organizations that led the crusade against Amendment 2, campaigned aggressively in the months leading up to the vote. Groups involved in the effort, such as the Kentucky Student Voice Team (KSVT) and the Kentucky School Boards Association, put on independent events across the state.

Strategic moves like these enabled the campaign to accomplish its eventual sweeping victory. Still, the path to “no” was not as simple as it may seem.

The Buildup

Although Amendment 2 was introduced only within the past year, the idea behind it is nothing new. In fact, Kentucky lawmakers and our Supreme Court have been at odds over funding for private education for years.

In 2017, Kentucky’s House Bill 520 (HB520) legalized the creation of charter schools, a type of school that operates under an independent board. These schools have more flexibility than



For Their Education – The Kentucky Student Voice Team showcases their opposition to Amendment 2 with signs in Frankfort, Kentucky on Oct. 13. The students’ tour aimed to reach voters who have never heard of the amendment. *Photo by Derek Bush Jr.*

public schools, but still benefit from public funding.

HB520 was controversial, the debate lasting several hours in both the House and Senate. Its passage made Kentucky the 44th state to implement such legislation. However, the General Assembly didn’t approve a funding mechanism for the proposed schools, so no charter schools actually emerged from the effort.

In 2022, GOP lawmakers proposed a remedy to this issue in the form of House Bill 9 (HB9), which mandated the use of public school funds for charter schools. Although the bill originally passed, Governor Beshear swiftly vetoed it. Not long after, the state legislature overrode the veto. The debate finally ended at the end of 2023, when Chief Circuit Judge Phillip Shepherd struck down HB9 due to unconstitutionality.

After the promise of a charter school system failed to come to fruition, the battle continued in the form of vouchers. On Feb. 23, 2021, District 50 Rep. Chad McCoy introduced House Bill 563 to the Kentucky House of Representatives. Put shortly, the bill aimed to establish a tax credit program that would help fund scholarships to private schools, using a system comparable to what a handful of other states have implemented as a “voucher program.”

The bill was passed by the General Assembly in March of 2021, but the Kentucky Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional the following December. In January 2024, several Republican lawmakers joined Rep. James Tipton to introduce HB2, which attempted to alter the Kentucky

Constitution so the General Assembly could provide financial support for the education of students outside of the public school system. The passage of that bill led to the proposition of Amendment 2, which would allow for the creation of both voucher programs and charter schools.

A Difficult Past

Nationally, school choice initiatives have a long and complex history, especially in the southern region of the U.S. The modern school choice movement originated in the 1950s after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ruled that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional. White parents, unhappy with the verdict, promoted “freedom of choice” in order to keep their children in segregated schools.

In Virginia in 1959, the Prince Edward County Board created the first school voucher program, then called tuition grants. Leaders resisting integration understood that many white southerners couldn't afford exorbitant private school expenses, and the ones that could wouldn't justify the price tag. By reducing the cost, both groups were able to send their children to these schools, keeping a decades-old system of educational segregation in place. Throughtuition programs and other initiatives, state and local governments could slash public school budgets, targeting schools with a majority Black population.

These programs and policies spread across the American South and their legacy is especially evident in Louisville today. White students make up around 80% of the student body at private schools like Collegiate, Sacred Heart Academy and Holy Cross, while JCPS's cumulative student population is only about 38% white.

Supporters of Amendment 2 claimed that it would reverse this effect. They maintained that, through public funding, all sorts of students would be able to attend private schools. However, given the historical prejudice behind school choice decisions, this claim seems doubtful.

Many states enacted voucher programs in recent years, and the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy estimated that between 65-90% of voucher recipients already had their children enrolled in a private school the year before.

In Arizona, families received vouchers to homeschool their children. However, the funds were reportedly used for questionable expenses like horseback riding lessons, home gyms and television sets, among other things.

Spreading the Word

This piece of evidence was one of many brought up during the campaign against Amendment 2. Protect Our Schools KY, a coalition of organizations focused on equitable education in the state, facilitated the movement and launched on May 23. The coalition hosted dozens of rallies, canvassings and other events.

One of the most active organizations in the group was the Kentucky Student Voice Team, or KSVT, a group of "young people co-creating more just, democratic Kentucky schools and communities as education research, policy, and storytelling partners." Utilizing an active student base and large online following, KSVT launched their own campaign to defeat Amendment 2.

"We believed that it was important for the student voice to be heard in this campaign, given that the amendment would directly affect us the most," said Peter Jefferson, 17, the campaign's coordinator.

The group's effort crescendoed on Oct. 13, when they embarked on their "Myth Bus Tour," a day-long trip across Kentucky. At each stop, students and adults spoke during 30-minute-long "teach-ins." The speeches touched on the economic consequences of Amendment 2, the severe impact on rural schools and the problematic history of voucher programs. They often included personal anecdotes of students' experiences in Kentucky's public education system.

"Many of the arts and humanities programs such as speech and theater that have shaped me and provided me with a home away from home rely on the funding that this amendment would take from us," said Ivy Litton, 17, a senior at Rowan County High School.

The students traveled from stop to stop in a bright yellow school bus, adorned with a poster that read "Public Dollars for Public Schools." When parked, the teens dangled hand-drawn signs with brightly colored slogans like "Kick Vouchers to the Curb!" and "Honk if You Support Public Schools!" out the window. After months of weekly meetings over Zoom, the students were eager to speak on the amendment.

"When I first moved to the U.S., the first school I attended was a public school, which allowed me to have connections and explore and just learn more about who I am as a student," said Danielle Chivero, 16, a junior at Tates Creek High School in Lexington, during the drive to Frankfort.

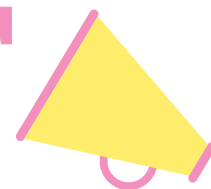
Chivero noted that although she is a stakeholder, her involvement in KSVT goes beyond personal interest.

"I chose to get involved because this is not only harming me, but it's also harming everyone, every student around me," Chivero said.

KSVT's efforts paid off. Several local news stations covered the event, and videos uploaded to Instagram reached

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thousands of views, drawing more youth attention to the issue.

“A lot of what I’ve seen also comes from social media with people sharing stuff on their platforms,” said Mitchell Smith, 18, a senior at Atherton High School and first-time voter. “That’s how I was introduced to the movement as a whole.”

As the topic gained more online traction, conversations surrounding it materialized more and more in real life. Katie Kolb, 17, a junior at Eastern High School, said the topic came up in her AP Government and Politics class.

“A lot of people were, again, very shocked that that was even a possibility,” Kolb said. “Obviously, as a bunch of public school students, we don’t want funding being taken away from public schools.”

Other students made individual efforts to sway voters. Liam Amick, 17, a senior at Trinity High School, gained a surge of attention after writing an article about the amendment for the Courier Journal in late October. After Trinity’s president spoke to

students about the amendment, Amick realized his stance.

“He came and talked to us about it, and said that Trinity students could get service hours to phone bank for it. As he was describing it, I was like, whoa, I don’t like the sound of this,” Amick said. “Would this not take away money from public schools?”

Amick’s article poked several holes in commonly made arguments for the amendment, including the misconception that JCPS has a spare \$1 billion available. He also emphasized that most Louisville private schools already have a surplus of funding.

“In the summer of 2022, a donor provided money for Trinity to install a videoboard in the football stadium. At a high school,” Amick wrote.

Engaging young people became essential to the campaign in the weeks leading up to election day. According to a Protect Our Schools KY poll, the votes from ages 18-29 heavily leaned toward “yes” in the summer, but were a solid “no” by the fall.

Beginning on Sept. 25, just over a month before the election, KSVT flooded its Instagram with popular memes. They included an image of a pro-Amendment 2 flier edited over a broken Twix bar with the caption “Watch out parents! Out-of-state billionaires have begun hiding their pro-Amendment 2 mail in Halloween candy this year.” Another highlighted a shot from “Mean Girls” featuring the titular trio sitting in a car, captioned “get in loser, we’re stopping Amendment 2.”

Meanwhile, Kentucky Students First stuck to more traditional strategies. Throughout September and October, Kentuckians across the state received fliers in their mailboxes promoting the amendment, all with varying catchphrases.

“We need to update our constitution because moms deserve

a choice in education. 1891 was a long time ago. Women have a voice now,” one flier read, referencing Kentucky’s constitution, which was ratified before women had the right to vote.

“A vote ‘yes’ on Amendment 2 is a vote against the swamp,” read another. “President Trump wants you to support school choice, vote YES on 2.”

This specific flier featured an image of Trump speaking in front of a crowd, which included several photoshopped signs promoting Amendment 2. The fliers left many of Kentucky’s voters confused, including Pamela Zipper, the seventh through 12th grade division director at Walden School.

“I still don’t know if the information they’re providing us brings enough clarity,” Zipper said. “We can funnel money into charter schools and private-independent schools, but I still question, ‘where does that come from?’”

Zipper has worked as an educator for over 15 years in three states. She’s taught at private, public and Catholic schools. Although she is currently employed at a private institution, she still passionately supports public schools.

“I want us to stand by our public educators,” Zipper said. “I want us to ensure that all students are afforded the opportunity of a great education,” Zipper said.

The Vote

On Nov. 5, months of relentless campaigning came to a close. Kentucky’s constituents made their choice — and that choice was “no.”

The heart of the argument in favor of Amendment 2 relied on the assumption that public schools are inadequate, or that students want “out” and to choose a “better” option.

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- Pamela Zipper, 7th through 12th grade director at Walden School





Speaking Out - Allison Slone, a special education teacher at Rowan County Senior High School, speaks at the Amendment 2 Myth Bus Tour teach-in in Frankfort, Kentucky on Oct. 13. Photo by Derek Bush Jr.

In my experience, this hasn't been the case. I attended a private Catholic school for seven years. From kindergarten to sixth grade, I put on my plaid skirt, short-sleeved button down and color-appropriate socks every single day and walked into a class with 20 other students in it. Although many of my classmates thrived in the environment, I struggled to fit in. There were few extracurricular activities, with most of the school's attention focused on sports. Exclusionary language revolving around race, gender and sexuality wasn't uncommon.

When I switched to a public middle school in seventh grade, I found new friends, clubs and teachers who helped me feel welcome. There was a clear difference in the financial situations of the two schools:

my elementary school was newer and cleaner, constantly undergoing renovations, while my middle school remained a time capsule of its original 1970s design. To me, though, material differences were secondary to the differences in community.

My story is one of school choice. Participating in the opportunities I want and need is only possible because public schools have funding. For me and thousands of other students across the commonwealth, public schools have been and will continue to be our chosen place of education. This is true for some students in rural Kentucky, who may not have access to a private school in their area. It's true for queer students whose private options may not welcome them. It's true for students of color who may feel alienated in a private school

setting. By taking away funding from public schools, these students may only be hurt, not helped.

Although Amendment 2 is no longer a threat, many of our state's public schools are still deeply in need. It's essential we continue to advocate for public education, no matter the political atmosphere. •

Follow the KSVT bus tour here!

Video by Maggie Stone

