

Why Education Reformers Will Find A Home In The Trump Administration



02-15-2025 ~ *Trump's inclination to mix policymaking with business deals and profiteering is an ideal situation for education reformers like his nominee Penny Schwinn.*

During Donald Trump's first presidential term and the Joe Biden presidential administration, proponents of education reform declared their movement dead. Their well-funded campaign to blame teachers for low scores on standardized tests, threaten public schools with closures, and ramp up market competition from charter schools was "[over](#)" and had "[died off](#)," reform proponents said, highlighting the "[ending](#)."

Donald Trump's rise in the Republican Party and his 2024 presidential win also posed challenges for education reform advocates.

As the 2024 presidential campaign raged, Axios [found](#) "public education reform missing from 2024 presidential platforms." Prominent reform advocate Chester E. Finn Jr. [lamented](#) in the conservative education policy journal, Education Next, in 2023, "By omitting the longstanding 'ed-reform agenda,' the Trump team is not only departing from forty years of GOP education priorities, but also seems to not be making a play for suburban moms, independents, or Democrats, maybe not even for Republicans beyond his 'base.'"

As Trump was about to take office in January 2025, Education Week [reported](#) that "[s]weeping education reforms is not a priority" for the incoming Trump administration.

"It's hard to be optimistic about education reform in the wake of the [2024] election," [wrote](#) Michael J. Petrilli, a longtime education reform advocate and president of the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

“Education reformers should respond to the election with some critical self-reflection,” [wrote](#) Mind Trust CEO Brandon Brown, a prominent charter school advocate, who accused his fellow education reformers of being “in a professional and cultural bubble... [that runs] the risk of not truly understanding the diverse communities we serve.”

However, the negative outlook of the reform crowd changed in January 2025 with the [nomination](#) of Penny Schwinn as the deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Education under Linda McMahon, Trump’s choice for secretary of education.

“Schwinn’s nomination offers hope that Uncle Sam could turn his attention back toward evidence and excellence,” [wrote](#) Thomas B. Fordham Institute’s Dale Chu, noting “her belief in using state assessment data to drive decisions, ensuring that progress was both measurable and targeted.”

Another Fordham executive, Robert Pondiscio, [opined](#), “Penny Schwinn’s nomination is an opportunity to refocus on what matters: ensuring that America’s schools fulfill their twin missions of cultural transmission *and* competence.”

Arne Duncan, the secretary of education under former Democratic President Barack Obama and an [ardent reform acolyte](#), [praised](#) Schwinn as “a serious person” and “smart.”

But what makes Schwinn an especially good match for the Trump administration has nothing to do with education policy. Instead, Schwinn’s hire has everything to do with what some are [calling](#), “Trump’s ‘golden age’ of corruption and cronyism.”

Writing for the American Prospect, David Dayen [warned](#) in November 2024 that the Trump administration would entail “four years of pay-to-play deals, corporate back-scratching, and a public unprotected from scam artists.” Dayen ticked off a few industries that stand to gain under Trump’s administration, including the oil and gas industry, for-profit prison providers, and cryptocurrency exchanges.

Matt Ford [wrote](#) for the New Republic in January 2025 that throughout Trump’s chaotic reign, one constant will be his collusion with the wealthy oligarchs who helped elect him. They will use their influence over his presidency to “enrich [themselves] even further,” Ford said. “This government will be for billionaires, of billionaires, and by billionaires.”

Fears that a Trump administration will ratchet up higher levels of government corruption have been borne out, as he has [fired ethics watchdogs](#), [paused law enforcement powers](#), and [done favors for political friends](#).

Trump's mix of public policymaking with business deals and personal profiteering are ideal waters for education reformers to swim in. Reformers tend to do very well in forming networks of like-minded individuals in business, politics, and philanthropy. These groups of individuals use their financial and political connections to influence school leadership decisions, redesign school systems to function more like businesses, and ensure that private enterprises get a bigger share of the money paid by taxpayers to fund teachers and classrooms.

Much like the corruption and cronyism that characterize the Trump administration, reformers and their networks always seem to advance their personal careers and help create higher profits for private enterprises they're connected to. And Schwinn is a card-carrying member.

'Influence on Steroids'

One of the earliest and most influential of these education reform networks is the [Broad Center](#), which runs a prestigious school leadership training academy funded through the [Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation](#). Schwinn was a member of the Broad Center's [2014-2016 cohort](#).

Eli Broad, a successful businessman (now deceased) who made billions in the Los Angeles real estate market, started his foundation and training center with the mission to "[advance entrepreneurship](#)" in education. As I [reported](#) for Our Schools in 2019, Broad's efforts to transform school management included training prospective and current school leaders to practice a more corporate style of [school governance](#) that emphasizes business methodologies rather than democratic engagement. Broad's approach stressed outsourcing school services to private firms, confining decision-making about how education funding is spent to a tight group of inside operators, and keeping those decisions behind a managerial curtain.

Another reform network Schwinn has been part of is [Chiefs for Change](#). Schwinn was a member of the [third cohort](#) of the group's Future Chiefs program before she was selected to be commissioner for Tennessee in 2019.

Chiefs for Change is an offshoot of a nonprofit called Foundation for Excellence in

Education (FEE) that was created by former Florida Governor and failed presidential candidate Jeb Bush. FEE has since undergone a name change to [ExcelinEd](#).

Much like the Broad Center, FEE was set up to provide a nexus among reform-minded school leaders, their political allies, and private businesses looking to profit from new policies reformers wanted.

In 2013, privatization watchdog group [In the Public Interest \(ITPI\)](#) obtained, through public records requests, documents that showed FEE and Chiefs for Change urged lawmakers to pass legislation that would benefit private businesses, including one that Bush had made a substantial investment in. In [reporting](#) the story, Education Week quoted ITPI founder and executive director Donald Cohen, who called this backroom deal-making, “influence on steroids.”

Because these reform networks push for charter schools and other forms of school privatization, reformers frequently rub elbows with right-wing advocacy groups who also support privatization. Schwinn, for instance, is [listed](#) as a school board training speaker for the Heritage Foundation, the influential conservative Beltway think tank that [authored Project 2025](#), the [policy blueprint](#) guiding Trump’s decision-making in office.

Advancing Her Career While Undermining Public Education

Schwinn’s work history as an education official in multiple states is awash with examples of collusion among public officials, education reform nonprofits, and private corporations.

In 2018, when she served as chief deputy commissioner of academics in the Texas Education Agency, Schwinn was accused by a state audit of “[offering a no-bid \\$4.4 million contract to SPEDx](#), which was hired to analyze how schools serve students with disabilities and help create a long-term special education plan for the state,” Texas Tribune [reported](#). Schwinn’s department also “did not disclose that she had received professional development training from the person who ultimately became a subcontractor on the project.”

Texas state auditors also found that Schwinn’s department gave preferential treatment to a vendor that received a contract for creating a “more user-friendly” website for the state’s school district rating system.

Schwinn's issues with favoritism and conflicts of interest in the procurement process followed her to her next leadership position in Tennessee, where she served as education commissioner from January 2019 until June 2023.

In 2019, Tennessee legislators voted to remove Schwinn's voting privileges on the Tennessee Textbook and Instructional Materials Quality Commission after a textbook publisher and some school district directors complained "she interfered in book selection by playing favorites," [Tennessee Lookout](#) stated in 2021.

In 2020, Schwinn and her department again drew the scrutiny of lawmakers for her "handling of a no-bid contract with ClassWallet, hired for \$1.25 million a year to manage the state's upcoming voucher program," Chalkbeat [reported](#). State lawmakers also criticized Schwinn for bypassing the legislature's contract review process and letting the contract balloon to twice its budget.

Tennessee's voucher program, a [priority](#) for Republican Governor Bill Lee, was [stymied](#) for several years but finally [passed](#) in 2025.

In 2021, Schwinn obligated Tennessee to a multi-million-dollar deal "with a New York-based company as part of the state's reading initiative, a move lawmakers say creates a potential conflict of interest because her husband works for the vendor," Tennessee Lookout [reported](#). The \$8.06 million contract was with the New Teacher Project (TNTP), [a company started by Michelle Rhee](#).

In defense of Schwinn, supporters, such as the education reform media outlet The74, have branded her a "[reading champion](#)" because of results from Tennessee's 2023 reading tests that showed [substantial gains](#) in scores.

Under Schwinn's leadership, the state adopted a new reading approach in 2021 that focuses on shifting to [phonics-based instruction](#) and turning the state's third grade reading exam into a [high-stakes test](#) that would make those who flunk the test either repeat the third grade or undergo high-dosage tutoring in fourth grade. Both [phonics-based instruction](#) and [high-stakes testing](#) for third graders are policies typically promoted by education reform advocates.

But determining what exactly causes changes in test scores is [difficult to pinpoint](#). Meanwhile, when high-stakes testing in reading put 60 percent of Tennessee third graders [at risk of being left back](#), state education policymakers [decided](#) to tweak the criteria for holding back third graders.

Further, focusing solely on test score improvements, a favorite tactic of reformers, ignores Schwinn's potential conflicts of interest and her long track record of advancing her career while undermining public education.

In the Thick of the Education Reform Circle

Although press outlets describe her as a "[former teacher](#)," Schwinn's teaching experience consists of a brief stint, from 2004-2007, with Teach for America (TFA), [according to](#) the Tennessee Star.

TFA is an alternative teacher entry program that places recruits in struggling schools after they've completed a mere [five weeks](#), or [perhaps less](#), of training. Although the program's results are [mixed, at best](#), TFA has been a [staunch ally](#) of reform advocates who don't like university teacher certification programs and teachers' unions.

However, a closer look at Schwinn's career in the classroom, via her [LinkedIn page](#), which has been taken down, shows she split her early years as an educator between Baltimore City Public Schools, where she served as a classroom teacher, and a "program director"—likely a teacher training position, according to a [source](#) who has observed her career closely—in the Los Angeles school system.

Since her early teaching career, Schwinn has traveled through a whirlwind of jobs and personal and professional relationships that have placed her in the thick of education reform circles.

After her work with TFA, Schwinn took a hiatus from education to serve a two-year stint in a data and information management position for [McMaster Carr](#), a tool and hardware supplier. Then, she found her way back into education via a position at the [St. Hope](#) in Sacramento, California, where Schwinn grew up.

St. Hope began in 1989 as an after-school program founded by former Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson, according to the foundation's [website](#). But in 2003, St. Hope took on a much more ambitious agenda, including taking over a local high school, converting it to a charter school, and opening two other new [charter schools](#).

In 2011, Johnson [married](#) Michelle Rhee, also a TFA alum. Rhee was [the face of school reform](#) as the hard-charging leader of Washington, D.C., schools from 2007-2010. In that role, she "created a system that demanded ever-higher

accomplishments—higher test scores, higher graduation rates,” the Washington Post [reported](#) in 2018 after the reform policies Rhee had ushered in proved to be deeply flawed. “Philanthropic dollars poured in. President Barack Obama offered praise. And one of the most dysfunctional school systems in America became known as a model for education reform efforts nationwide,” the Post [reported](#). But “behind-the-scenes troubles... spilled over into scandals” that included widespread cheating on standardized test results and a cover up of administrative malfeasance. (Johnson also ended up having [troubles of his own](#).)

Also in 2011, while still with the St. Hope, Schwinn, [founded](#) and briefly led a charter school, [Capitol Collegiate Academy](#) in Sacramento, a move which no doubt further ingratiated her to school reformers.

Then in 2012, Schwinn won a “hotly contested race,” [according to the Sacramento Bee](#), for the Sacramento County Board of Education. Schwinn was backed by “thousands of dollars in support from Parents for Great School Sacramento, a committee with ties to the California Charter Schools Association,” while her opponent had the support of the local teachers’ union.

In [July 2013](#), Schwinn left her job with the Sacramento County Board to accept a “six-figure administrative position” as superintendent of performance management for Sacramento City Unified School District, the very administrative body, [according to the Sacramento Bee](#), that approved the application of Collegiate Capitol Academy and oversaw its operations. To Schwinn’s credit, she resigned from the school’s staff to avoid a conflict of interest. But she continued to serve on the school’s board of directors in January 2015, [according to Chalkbeat](#), although she no longer appears on the school’s website.

In 2014, Schwinn [resigned](#) from her job with the city school district to accept a job with the Delaware Department of Education. According to [a Delaware-based blogger](#), months after she was hired, her husband, Paul Schwinn, was employed as the director of leadership development for the Delaware Leadership Project, funded by the Delaware DOE, [the Rodel Foundation of Delaware](#), and the Vision Network.

The Rodel Foundation is a prominent proponent of “[school choice](#)” in the state. The Vision Network was [led by Mark Murphy](#), a member of Chiefs for Change who [served](#) as Delaware’s secretary of education from 2012-2015, [resigning](#) after

[failing](#) to enact an agenda of unpopular education reforms.

A Confluence of Investors and Influencers

In addition to her work in the education sector, Schwinn has also been an operating partner for the investment firm [Vistria](#), which manages almost [\\$16 billion](#) across [multiple sectors](#), including K-12 and early childhood education. (It is not clear whether Schwinn has stepped down from this position since her nomination.)

Vistria's [education portfolio](#) consists primarily of companies that would benefit when colleges and universities or state and local education systems decide to outsource to the private sector education services, such as instruction, curriculum, special education, tech, health care, and library management. Although these companies may be good investments for Vistria, some of them have had troubling results.

For example, Vistria has invested in [Edmentum](#), a company that provides [online learning courses](#) for high school students who have fallen behind in their coursework or who are at risk of not graduating, a process known as credit recovery. Research [studies](#) have [found](#) that online credit recovery programs, including [those offered by Edmentum](#), generally lack rigor; often lead to lower college enrollments and higher enrollment in lower-quality colleges; and enable cheating by allowing students to Google questions and copy-paste answers from the internet.

Also, high school students who completed their degrees through online credit recovery [do not fare as well](#) in the labor market later in life. While they may initially have comparable earnings to those who did not participate in online credit recovery, overtime they fall behind their peers.

FullBloom, another Vistria holding that it eventually [sold](#), is a provider of services for students with disabilities, including autism and behavioral health. [FullBloom](#), through its subsidiary [Specialized Education Services, Inc.](#), has been a target of investigations for malpractice in [Connecticut](#), [Missouri](#), and [Philadelphia](#).

Schwinn is also the chief operating officer at [BHA Strategy](#), a political strategy firm [founded](#) by two former staff members to Tennessee Governor Lee: [Blake Harris](#)—Lee's former chief of staff and a [registered lobbyist](#) to the Tennessee state legislature—and Laine Arnold, who was [Lee's communications director](#). (It is

not clear whether Schwinn has stepped down from this position since her nomination.)

Harris “[played a pivotal role](#)” in passing Tennessee’s voucher program, according to the Tennessean.

BHA Strategy also brought on [Brent Easley](#), who served as Lee’s legislative director to serve as president. Before joining the Lee administration, Easley had worked for [TennesseeCAN](#), and its predecessor [StudentsFirst TN](#), and with Republicans in the Tennessee State House. StudentsFirst TN is the state chapter of the national organization StudentsFirst [founded](#) by Michelle Rhee after she left her position with the Washington, D.C., public schools. TennesseeCAN was one of the groups that [pressured](#) the legislature to pass the state’s new school voucher program.

Easley was a [registered lobbyist](#) in the state for the American Federation for Children, the group started by former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos that advocates for vouchers.

More recently, BHA Strategy [announced](#) a partnership with [BGR Group](#), a Washington, D.C., lobbyist with [more than 200 clients](#), giving the Tennessee-based firm, and Schwinn, a connection to a prestigious Beltway influencer.

All of these seemingly separate developments could not be coming together at a more opportune time for Schwinn and her fellow reformers, as Trump, in his barrage of executive orders, issued a [mandate](#) directing states to spend discretionary federal funds for education on all forms of school choice, including charter schools and voucher programs.

At the same time, Republicans in Congress are pushing [a bill](#) to create a national school voucher program, which Trump appointee Linda McMahon is expected to support, should she be approved as education secretary. (A congressional hearing to approve Schwinn’s nomination has yet to be scheduled as of press time.)

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