

FEDERAL

A Chaotic Start to a New Congress: What Educators Need to Know



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Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., talks on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives on Jan. 3 following the first round of voting for House Speaker. McCarthy fell short of enough votes to be elected speaker in three rounds of voting on opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol.

— Andrew Harnik/AP

The fresh slate of lawmakers who began congressional terms this week will have the power to influence federal education policy, but it remains to be seen what, if anything, they'll do.

Tuesday, Jan. 3, marked a chaotic opening day for the 118th Congress after Republicans in the House of Representatives failed to elect a new speaker for the first time in a century. Until the

speaker is chosen, the House is in limbo and newly elected members won't be sworn in.

In the Senate, Vice President Kamala Harris became the first woman in U.S. history to swear in 35 newly elected or re-elected senators after a seamless vote to reinstate Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., as majority leader.

Schumer and the speaker, who is expected to be Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., will lead their respective chambers, guiding their party agendas, and ensuring that Senate and House rules are followed. They'll be among the most influential voices in all areas of policy, including education.

Meanwhile, shakeups to Senate and House education committees will likely lead to a focus on parents' rights, career and technical education, and student loan forgiveness.

Here's what educators need to know as the new Congress gets underway.

With a divided Congress, significant action is unlikely

With Democrats maintaining control of the Senate and Republicans taking power in the House, the next two years will force lawmakers to compromise if they want to get things done. That will likely mean little movement on more divisive education policies such as conservative-leaning parents' rights policies and liberal-leaning measures for big increases in education funding.

But there may still be points of compromise when it comes to career and technical education, universal pre-kindergarten, and efforts to raise teacher pay, experts say.

Politicians on both sides of the political aisle, including Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C., and U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, have lauded career education programs and apprenticeships as an opportunity to give students a head start on career development and fill workforce needs in the economy.

"The main two [areas of potential compromise] are really sort of in the front end and the back end of pre-K through 12," said David Bloomfield, an education law professor at Brooklyn College and the City University of New York Graduate Center.

Committee shake-ups will lead to new education policy strategies

Most of the action will play out in the two congressional committees responsible for education policy: the House Committee on Education and Labor and Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, known as the HELP committee.

Both of those committees are slated to have new leadership. Foxx, who was the ranking member of the House committee in the last congress, is expected to take position as chair, while Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., is will likely lead the Senate HELP committee as its most senior member. Sanders, a progressive, typically caucuses with the Senate Democrats.

Foxx has expressed her support for parents' rights and career and technical education while pushing back against teachers' unions, which she argues don't have students' best interests in mind. Sanders is nearly the exact opposite and will likely use the position to push for universal free college and pre-kindergarten policies.

Sanders has also been a staunch supporter of universal free school meals policies, which he made a part of his campaign for president in 2020. Those policies have gained some traction after all students were able to eat free under pandemic-era U.S. Department of Agriculture waivers. Since those waivers expired last summer, Congress has failed to pass universal free school meal policies but an effort to ease the burden of inflation and supply chain issues for schools earned bipartisan support.

McCarthy and Schumer's education track records vary

The House speaker and Senate majority leader hold significant influence over their parties and have often advocated for policy changes with whoever is President.

Schumer, who was first elected to Congress in 1981 and served as minority leader during President Trump's term, has sponsored or co-sponsored 218 education-related bills throughout his time in Congress, according to the Congressional Record. He's known to advocate for school infrastructure, STEM education, and student loan debt relief. In his 2022 campaign for Senate, he also made a point to advocate for more funding for early-childhood education programs like Head Start.

McCarthy, who was first elected to Congress in 2007 and was still scrambling for votes to become House speaker on Jan. 4, has only sponsored two education-related bills, both of which supported the Intermediate Space Challenge, a STEM program in Mojave, Calif. McCarthy has made it clear that he supports school choice and expressed opposition to efforts to close schools to in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. He has also expressed his support for parents' rights policies.

In a 2021 op-ed for The Daily Caller, he advocated for a Senate Parent's Bill of Rights to "push back against [critical race theory] madness." The bill did not pass.

"Parents have had enough and we want every parent in America to know that they have advocates who will continue to fight for them," he wrote.



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