

School choice—past and present

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At the exact time I was giving a speech last week to 1,400 educators about ensuring that all children have access to a powerful, purposeful public education, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos was addressing the American Legislative Exchange Council—a group of corporate lobbyists and conservative legislators who are working to privatize and defund public education, and cloaking their efforts as school “choice.”

It’s no surprise; no matter the question, for DeVos, the answer is choice. When schools struggle, the “solution” privatization advocates invariably propose is “choice,” with the coda that poor families should have the same educational choices as more affluent families. But that innocuous word belies the record—both the academic results of private school choice and the way it was used historically to continue school segregation after the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional.

Undermining public education is how a democracy comes apart.

After the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, many school districts, especially in the South, resisted integration. White officials in Prince Edward County, Va., closed every public school in the district rather than have white and black children go to school together. They opened taxpayer-funded private schools where only white parents could choose to send their children.

Members of the American Federation of Teachers sent funds and school supplies. And some traveled from New York and Philadelphia to set up schools for black students, in keeping with the AFT’s tradition of fighting racism and injustice, which includes expelling our local unions that refused to integrate.

And what about the schools DeVos appallingly called “pioneers of school choice”—historically black colleges and universities? HBCUs are vital institutions, but the truth is that they arose from the discriminatory practices that denied black students access to higher education.

Make no mistake: The real “pioneers” of private school choice were the white politicians who resisted school integration.

DeVos’ preferred choices—tuition vouchers and tax credits, and private, for-profit charter schools—actively destabilize our public schools. They can—and many do—discriminate, because private schools do not follow federal civil rights laws. They drain funds from public schools and increase racial and economic segregation. They lack the accountability that public schools have. And, after decades of experiments with voucher programs, the research is clear: They fail most of the children they purportedly are intended to benefit, children who are disproportionately black, brown and poor.

An analysis of the Washington, D.C., voucher program by the Department of Education found it has a negative effect on student achievement. The Louisiana voucher program has led to large declines in kids’ reading and math scores. Students in Ohio’s voucher program did worse than children in traditional public schools. And for-profit and online charter schools have similarly troubling results.

These choices move us further away from the choice every child in America deserves—well-supported, effective public schools near his or her home.

But Trump and DeVos are not backing off their support for vouchers, for-profit charters and other privatization schemes. They have proposed spending billions of tax dollars on vouchers and tuition tax credits, paid for by cutting federal education spending that goes directly to educate children in public schools by \$9 billion.

Make no mistake: This use of privatization and this disinvestment are only slightly more polite

cousins of segregation. The same forces are keeping the same children from getting the public education they need and deserve. And how better to pave the way to privatize public education than to starve public schools to the breaking point, criticize their deficiencies and let the market handle the rest—all in the name of choice.

That’s how a democracy comes apart.

Defenders of democracy must not only call out what doesn’t work and resist injustice, but fight for and act to reclaim the promise of public schools. Public schools are not perfect, and every one doesn’t always work for every one of its students. But, as far as I am concerned, our only choice is: Do we, as a nation, strengthen and improve our public schools, or don’t we?

We know what works to accomplish this: investment in and a focus on the four pillars of powerful, purposeful public education. These pillars are children’s well-being, powerful learning, educators’ capacity, and collaboration. They are in place in every public school that is working as it should, and they can and should be present in every school.

DeVos went on the attack after my speech. I’d like to think that an education secretary is capable of and interested in learning from history and evidence, and that someone in that position would support, not decimate, the public schools that 90 percent of our kids attend. A good start would be backing off the DeVos-Trump plan to strip \$9 billion directly from education services for kids.

I invite you to learn more at www.aft.org/fourpillars.



Weingarten with her former student, Claudia Marte, at the American Federation of Teachers’ TEACH conference in Washington, D.C., July 20.

Courtesy of Randi Weingarten

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