



Private school choice—past and present

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

RECENTLY, I GAVE A SPEECH about ensuring that all children have access to a powerful, purposeful public education. At the exact same time, 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, privatization advocates invariably propose choice as the solution, 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 was unconstitutional.

After the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, many school districts, especially in the South, resisted integration. White officials in Prince Edward County, Virginia, for example, 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 to set up schools for black students, and some traveled from New York and Philadelphia to help. Their activism was in keeping with the AFT’s long history of fighting racism and injustice—a history that 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. The real “pioneers” of private school choice were the white politicians who resisted school integration.

DeVos’s 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 or brown, and poor.

But President 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. The bigotry and hatred on display in Charlottesville, the president’s failure to unequivocally denounce it, and threats to deport young people who have made their lives in the United States remind us of our nation’s many unhealed wounds—

and of the importance of our public schools in uniting us.

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?

Undermining public education is how a democracy comes apart.

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.

Defenders of democracy must not only call out what doesn’t work and resist injustice, but also fight to reclaim the promise of public schools. That is the objective of the NAACP’s Task Force on Quality Education, which recently released a report calling for more equitable and adequate funding for schools serving students of color, investing in low-performing schools and schools with significant opportunity and achievement gaps, mandating a rigorous authorizing and renewal process for charter schools, and eliminating for-profit charter schools.

The NAACP caught flak from some privatizers who have attempted to cast themselves as the new civil rights movement. And, not surprisingly, DeVos went on the attack after my speech. But those who truly want to ensure that all children have access to the great education they need—not by chance, not by choice, but by right—will fight to make every public school a place where parents want to send their children, students are engaged, and teachers want to teach.