

Don't Let the Government Take Away Your Public School

12/08/2016 04:18 pm ET | Updated 17 minutes ago



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With his selection of Betsy DeVos to be Secretary of Education, Donald Trump has made it clear. He wants to take away your public school. Tell him, “Keep the government’s hands off our public schools!”

In the fiery debates leading up to the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) the phrase “Keep the government’s hands off my Medicare” became emblematic of the unnerving juxtaposition of citizens influenced by decades of conservative anti-government rhetoric and the public’s love affair with certain government-run, taxpayer-funded programs.

Many need improvement, but it is democratically governed public schools that have made America great- not private schools and not charter schools. We all know that we can love what is imperfect. We need to strengthen the marriage between public schools and equity, not a divorce.

Obamacare passed- but barely- on the wings of widespread recognition of the need to address inequity in health care. Progressives’ efforts to insert the so-called public option or expansion of Medicare into new legislation failed to counter the influence privatization ideologues and profiteers. As a result, millions benefited, but the benefit was constrained.

The ACA built on and protected an already existing for-profit health care structure.

For education the tables are turned. Democratically controlled schools for all are the norm. Trump and his supporters seek a taxpayer-funded private option to

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undermine and even replace the existing public school system. Make no mistake. Profit and exclusivity will trump quality and inclusiveness. Privatization means working class children get less and the wealthy keep getting more.

Conservatives who seek opportunities to exploit every crevice of daily life to maximize private profit have consistently resisted every public program from Social Security to Medicare and Medicaid. They resist every financial, environmental or workplace regulation meant to protect the vulnerable. They resist every opportunity for workers to gain collective strength through their unions. They resist every constraint on using their financial power to influence legislation through their campaign contributions and lobbyists. At the same time, many support rather than resist restriction of voting rights.

In short, in the name of liberty and freedom, the modern conservative movement represents an exaltation of selfishness. Since the empowered want to maintain their privileges, the real intent behind, "Don't let the government tell you what to do" is, "We know best. Leave it to us." Donald Trump will not break from this tradition.

A striking example is the growing campaign to shift federal and state funding from public schools to charter schools and private schools through vouchers. Sadly, the former has been supported by many Democrats, while the latter has been the long-held dream of "competition solves everything" Republicans and those seeking to tear down our historic church-state barriers.

For over a century, taxpayer-funded public schools that were governed by locally elected school boards lived side-by-side with privately funded and governed non-sectarian and religiously-affiliated schools. The vast majority of parents chose the former for their children. The prevailing, but often contested, assumption was that parents had a right to send their children to private schools, but at their expense.

We are at a crossroads. Integration, diversity, and democracy are under attack as unifying national priorities here in the US and around the world. The ethos of "be out for yourself" is gaining ascendancy over "I am my brothers' and sisters' keeper" as inequity and terrorism erode hope and security. In that context, entrepreneurs seek to

undermine confidence and exacerbate parent anxiety about the quality and safety of public schools, and exploit a potentially vast education market. Persistent underfunding aids this cynical agenda.

We have a lot to do to improve education in the US. Inequity is persistent and too many schools fall far short on citizenship development. However, public opinion surveys consistently show that parents express greater satisfaction with and confidence in their children's schools and teachers than with the schools they do not experience first hand.

Our great challenge ahead for education as with other critical features of community wellbeing is to find the language and solutions to mobilize people across their perceived disparate needs to find common cause.

"Don't let the government take away your public school," may be a place to start.

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