

Education Is Not Just Another Commodity

As citizens, we need to be wary and vigilant as we hear U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and Washington continue to champion charter schools and school choice as the cure-all for our challenges in education. While competition and free markets are core values that have grown and made our economy strong, we need to think more thoughtfully and cautiously if we expect these values to be ideal for all public institutions. A public school system, designed for the public good, cannot be engineered by government to mimic a market. Let's take a look at key reasons why:

Markets always have winners and losers.

In the private sector, when a business fails, the impact on the public is not always as significant as when a public school is defunded – or worse, closed. For example, in Detroit (where DeVos played a large role advocating for school choice), many years of competition has led to reduced programming and school closures. Taxpayer money has been channeled to for-profit charter schools. Economically disadvantaged parents, often facing the closure of their beloved neighborhood school, have worse options with no increase in student achievement. Detroit now has "educational deserts" where parents and children must travel significant distances for children to attend school.

Market Competition Contributes to Growing Inequalities

Schools competing for students opens the possibility of a vicious cycle in which communities with low performing schools are punished and wealthy communities receive greater funding advantages. We cannot achieve equity and equality when schooling is organized around a model of "the more you win, the more you get, and the more you lose, the less you are given." As money is pulled from under-performing schools and funneled into succeeding ones, the state can redistribute wealth up the socioeconomic ladder. This competition is contributing to our country's growing inequalities and diminishment of the middle and lower classes.

Public Education is a Shared Good

The idea that education is just another commodity to buy and sell on the market is flawed thinking. It is a shared good that we all contribute to and support. If we believe student funds are portable based on consumption choices, then what would prevent the growing number of taxpayers without children in school being able to redirect more of their tax dollars outside the education system toward other public services, such as the library, dog parks or public golf courses? For local public institutions to serve their constituents well, they need allegiance and support from all citizens.

Federal Interference in Local Public Schools Doesn't Work.

Historically, our public schools were designed to be governed locally. Our local public schools, overseen by locally elected boards, have been the bedrock of democracy. DeVos should take note and stay true to her administration's original mission of reducing federal interference in education. Let local communities decide how to run their schools.

If DeVos and Washington want to really improve local public schools, they just need to follow the proven factors that improve and strengthen public schools. These factors include:

- Investment in early childhood programming
- Rigorous high standards for all students
- Strong professional development for teachers and
- Resources channeled quickly and efficiently to the neediest students.

Supporting and advocating for these key elements will lead to beneficial outcomes for all. Education is about our most important community asset – our children – not a commodity to buy and sell.