



Pluralism and equality need educational freedom

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Americans recoil at "discrimination." The word connotes exclusion for not just superficial, but also hateful reasons, which Americans experienced for decades in the form of racial segregation — often government-mandated — from schools to lunch counters. This shameful history is no doubt why Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos set off a firestorm recently when she refused to say that she would prohibit potential federal vouchers from going to private schools that don't accept all comers.

But we should not let our immediate, understandable feelings keep us from asking: Might there be acceptable, perhaps even good, reasons that schools would not work with some people?

There may be. Pluralism, academic achievement, and authentic, sustainable integration are all important considerations.

First pluralism. Ours is a nation of greatly diverse people — myriad religions, ethnicities, languages, cultures — and we must allow unique communities to educate their children in ways that the political majority, which controls public schools, might not select, and do so without having to sacrifice their education tax dollars. We must enable people to choose schools that share their values, or cultures, or views of history, on a level playing field. If we do not, we doom them to unequal status under the law, and even risk their withering away in a generation or two.

Religion is the most obvious, widespread sticking point. By law, public schools cannot inculcate religious values. But there are millions of people who believe that religion is inseparable from education; that all life and learning is centered on God.

For more than a century public schools were de facto Protestant institutions for this reason, but that marginalized atheists, Roman Catholics, and many others. Schools also must take sides on issues with inescapable religious implications, such as evolution and sex education. These are huge reasons that millions of people enroll their children in private or home schools — Southern Baptists have even debated an "exodus" from public schools — but they must sacrifice their tax dollars to do so.

Of course, it is not just religious communities that are handicapped and rendered unequal under public schooling. Racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities often are, too. For instance, in Tucson, Ariz., a battle has raged for years over classes for Mexican-American students that focus on the

community's unique history and culture. They were eventually outlawed for advocating, among other things, "ethnic solidarity," which may just be another way of saying, "trying to sustain their community."

It now seems clear that equality and pluralism necessitate that communities be able to offer schooling on an equal footing with public schools. But the question remains: Does this also require that private schools be able to exclude some students?

For a school to truly stand for things central to the community it serves, those who enter the community must share those values. For instance, being forced to accept a large influx of families hostile to a community's views on, say, the role of Mexican-Americans in the United States, or marriage, would threaten the demise of such a school.

It could also smother a school academically. As sociologist James Coleman famously surmised after studying Roman Catholic schools, the key to their success was their high level of social capital; essentially, their internal cohesion from administrators, teachers, and families all voluntarily accepting the same norms and values. That enabled them to teach clear, rigorous curricula, and uphold well-delineated norms of behavior.

There is one last consideration when it comes to communities deciding whom they will and will not accept: freedom of association.

While prohibiting schools from turning some families away is utterly understandable given our history, it may be counterproductive, essentially creating unsustainable tolerance theater. As social psychologist Patricia Devine has noted, coercing prejudiced people to act in unprejudiced ways can fuel "anger and resentment, and sadly, this anger fuels their prejudice and their tendency to show a backlash against the pressure."

Of course, we should not stand idly by while people cruelly discriminate. We should expose, criticize, and shun bigots. But we should not let our revulsion for malevolent discrimination snuff out the ability of the country's countless, cherished communities to live on by teaching their children as they see fit.

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