



If you fear the Religious Right (or anyone else), school choice is not your enemy

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December 14, 2016

If you are against school choice, you support inequality under the law — at least when it comes to education. You also hugely amplify the threat that some group you don't like will control the public schools for which everyone must pay. You probably don't realize these things, but as a New York Times op-ed by Christian-Right watchdog Katherine Stewart illustrates, they are inescapable.

Stewart is worried about conservative Christians gaining dangerous influence in the coming Trump administration. "At the rightmost edge of the Christian conservative movement, there are those who dream of turning the United States into a Christian republic subject to 'biblical laws,'" Stewart writes. "In the unlikely figure of Donald J. Trump, they hope to have found their greatest champion yet."

Stewart identifies many members of the still-forming administration as harbingers of trouble, but the focus of her worry is education secretary nominee Betsy DeVos. DeVos comes from religiously conservative families that are financial supporters of groups such as the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family.

Setting aside that good people can be religious conservatives, what is Stewart's fear about DeVos? It appears, at first, that right-wing Christians will take over public schools. She writes that Christian Rightists such as Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church pastor D. James Kennedy, and televangelist Jerry Falwell, Sr., have spoken out against the public schools. Stewart cites Falwell writing in 1979 that "he hoped to see the day when there wouldn't be 'any public schools — the churches will have taken them over and Christians will be running them.'"

If Stewart's worry is that people whose values and ideas she finds disagreeable, maybe even repugnant, might take over the public schools, she stands on solid and expansive ground. For most of their existence, the public schools were de facto Protestant institutions to the detriment of Roman Catholics, Jews, atheists and others who were consigned to second-class citizenship.

At least, though, religion did not legally bar people from using the public schools. For centuries many African-Americans were prohibited from receiving any education, and when they were allowed to use the public schools they were shamefully segregated. And segregation wasn't just for African-Americans: In some parts of the country, Mexican Americans and Asians were also segregated.

Stewart's immediate worry, however, is not what we have seen throughout their history: Public schools by their inherent winner-take-all nature rendering huge swaths of people unequal. No, her worry is that DeVos supports school choice, which would let conservative Christians (and everyone else, by the way) get the education they want for their children without having first to pay for public schools, then again for schools that share their values.

When it comes to the Christian Right taking over the United States, Stewart declares, "Vouchers are part of the program."

Sorry, Ms. Stewart: You can either have public schools that inescapably impose one group's beliefs on everyone, killing equality and risking Christian-Right control, or you can have school choice.

Perhaps Stewart is okay with the current state of affairs because today's public schools exclude Christian thought. But that's still inequality: If you are an atheist or agnostic, you get a curriculum you're fine with. If you believe that God is a part of everything you do, that you can't compartmentalize your moral and religious convictions so they apply to some things and not others: tough cookies.

Of course, inequality is hardly just a problem of religion.

Do you think Mexican-American history is taught in a biased way that favors the victors? Too bad. Don't want creationism insinuated into your child's science instruction? Don't move to Louisiana! Fond of free expression? Oh boy.

The only way to deliver education that treats all people equally, with the added bonus of avoiding deeply divisive social conflict, is school choice. Exactly what DeVos has championed.

Now, there is a way to deliver choice that more fully respects everyone's conscience rights than vouchers: Tax credits for those who pay for their own private schooling, or for individuals and corporations who donate to groups that supply private school scholarships. These ensure that no one has their tax dollars sent against their will to schools they find disagreeable, while giving far more people the ability to get the education they want without having to impose it on everyone else.

It is surely not Stewart's intent, but prohibiting school choice ensures that people are treated unequally under the law. It is also a perfect way to get what Stewart likely fears most: conservative Christians trying to take over the public schools.

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