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Don't fear educational freedom, fear force

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It should come as no surprise that interest in school choice is booming, with 15 states currently considering expanding or starting private school choice programs. COVID-19 has shown people in even the wealthiest public school districts that one size cannot fit all. Some families want online instruction, some hybrid, some fully in-person, and one district cannot accommodate them all. Private schools, in contrast, have their own, diverse policies. Were education funds to follow students, parents could choose what they want without sacrificing their public education tax dollars.

Choice, quite simply, makes logical sense. Yet some opponents are freaking out.

Last Friday Jack Schneider, a historian and prominent choice opponent, published a Twitter thread in which he attacked state efforts to expand choice, characterizing them as “scary,” and saying public schools will be “kneecapped.” In writing about legislation to expand Arizona’s voucher program, Schneider warned that the effort was happening “in a state that has a massive and terrifying neo-voucher.”

What is this “terrifying neo-voucher?” Tax credits for people or corporations who donate to scholarship funds for kids to attend private schools.

That seems more like Casper the Friendly Ghost than Dracula. We already have all kinds of tax credits, including for attendance at any type of college, public or private. And we have choice in everything from televisions to package shipping. Is any of that super scary?

Such “terrifying” rhetoric is not novel—see a slew of recent titles of books taking on choice, including from Schneider—but it is overwrought. That said, even if hyperbolically stated, many opponents’ motives may be understandable.

Many people no doubt support public schooling—government-run schools to which kids are assigned—because they truly believe a common school system levels the education playing field and brings diverse people together. On the flip side, many honestly fear that choice allows people to select education they find repugnant, like schools with policies hostile to LGBTQ children.

These are not crazy worries. But to truly feel horror about choice you would need to ignore a lot of public schooling reality, including that it does not unite us—indeed, it forces divisive conflict—and it is chock full of its own unsettling things.

The history of public schooling is, of course, befouled by legally mandated racial segregation, as well as sometimes cruel marginalization of Catholics, immigrants, and many other groups.

Today, even with mandatory segregation gone, the residentially assigned public schools are highly stratified at the district, school, and classroom levels. And marginalization continues: In September, the Equal Justice Institute reported that over 240 public schools in 17 states are named after Confederate leaders, and about half of those serve majority Black or non-White students. Meanwhile, African Americans and other minority groups often have to fight to get what they see as fair representation in public school curricula. Finally, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network reported in 2017 that 72% of LGBTQ public school students had experienced victimization over their sexual orientation, and 61% over their gender expression.

What about the fear that choice would enable people to select schools with repugnant policies?

Some parents will indeed pick private schools with what many see as bigoted policies. But freedom of conscience is a basic right, and if we force all people to pay for public education, religious people should have the right to use the funding at schools that uphold their values rather than ignoring or violating them, as public schools too often do.

More important to all groups, failure to provide choice guarantees continued, fracturing social conflict, and inequality under the law for the losers. Without choice, for you to get what you want, you must defeat those who want something different. Indeed, one driver of both the right and left violence over the last few years is almost certainly a sense of having to fight—literally—to keep the “other side” from doing things to you, such as imposing “woke” curricula, or racist school discipline policies.

We should not fear freedom. We should fear force: Government requiring everyone to pay for schools that only those with the most political power control.

If we want peace—and peace of mind—we need school choice for all.

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