

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Need for Educational Reform in America

As a reward to the teacher unions of the United States for strongly supporting his run for the presidency, Jimmy Carter created the Department of Education, a Cabinet level Department with a large bureaucracy. Today that Department funnels billions of tax dollars to elementary, secondary and college institutions throughout the United States. Especially for the public elementary and secondary schools, there is a growing body of evidence indicating that this Department and the tax dollars spent since 1979 have not produced a good return on investment. One recent example is the results of the sixth Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test of the science, math and reading skills of 15-year olds from across the world. The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) published the most recent results on 6 December 2016. The US portion of the report indicated that the performance of US 15-year-olds fell 18 points between 2009 and 2015. The US has slid to a tie for 31st place among OECD's 35 nations, coming out ahead of only Greece, Chile, Turkey and Mexico. Arguably, most intellectually honest educators admit that the American system of public education is in need of thoroughgoing reform. But both Democrats and Republicans have blind spots when it comes to educational reform: Those on the left generally ignore bad public schools, pander to unions and protect underperforming teachers. Those on the right tend to stress private schools over public, ignoring the plight of children caught in public schools with no other option.

All of this poignant background for President-Elect Trump's appointment of Betsy DeVos to the position of Secretary of Education in his incoming administration. DeVos has been a consistent advocate of school choice, vouchers and charter schools in the US. She has advocated for laws that allow parents to use public dollars for private and religious schools (i.e., using vouchers). To lobby legislatures for charter school laws in her home state of Michigan, she founded and funded the Great Lakes Education Project. She did so because Michigan has historically rejected comprehensive educational reform. The results of her efforts are mixed, but one thing is clear—charter schools in a city such as Detroit have given parents at least one viable alternative to their failing public schools. In almost every facet of American civilization, competition thrives and, in order to maintain market share, where there is competition, improvements and modifications always follow. But not in public education! Public education is a monopoly and parents have no choice when it comes to where they educate their children. If they cannot afford private/religious schools, they must send their children to the public schools in their neighborhoods. The voucher system, the charter school movement and other innovations create options for involved, concerned parents.

What is the nature of these reform ideas?

- Charter schools are fee-free schools that are publically subsidized but independently run. Generally, tenure for teachers does not apply in such schools and teacher quality is strictly administered.
- School vouchers give public funds to poor parents so that they can pay the cost for their children to enroll in private schools, if they choose to do so. Theoretically, the idea is to empower parents to choose the school they deem best for their children. It is a dimension of what is also called the school-choice movement: Empower parents to make the wise decisions in educating their children.

Is there evidence that vouchers, charter schools and other innovations work? Paul E. Peterson, Harvard professor and director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance and a fellow at the Hoover Institution, provides some important evidence that makes a viable case for these educational innovations:

- Parental satisfaction is an important metric in measuring the contribution schools are making to the education of children. According to Peterson's survey, 46% of private-school parents say they are "very satisfied" with the quality of their children's teachers, and 32% of charter-school parents are equally enthusiastic, but only 23% of parents with students in public schools report that they are satisfied.
- On the important issue of instructing students in "character and values," 59% of private-school parents report high satisfaction as do 38% of charter-school parents, but only 21% of public school parents report high satisfaction.
- On school discipline, 46% of private-school parents are highly satisfied, as are 34% of charter-school parents and 17% of public schools. Very similar results are reported for issues of safety and expectations.
- Where private-school parents tend to be homeowners with higher incomes and college degrees, charter parents tend to have lower incomes, less education and less likely to be homeowners. For charter school parents, 21% are black and 36% are Hispanic as compared with public schools, where the parents are 10% black and 25% Hispanic.
- The US Department of Education did a survey in 2012 but the Obama administration never reported the charter-school results from this survey. Because the raw data are publically available, Peterson was able to access this information, which revealed that both private-school and charter-school parents are more satisfied with their schools than public school parents. They are also more satisfied with teachers, academic standards, discipline and "the way the school staff interacts with parents."

President-Elect Trump has vowed to spend \$20 billion to expand vouchers and charters nationwide. Choosing Betsy DeVos indicates that he means business when it comes to

fostering significant reform of public education in the US. There has not been such a concerted effort at promoting educational reform since Carter created the Department of Education in 1979.

Anyone who is objective and intellectually honest must conclude that the public school system must be reformed. The school choice movement and the charter-school movement are viable options for parents. Both empower parents and both produce improved satisfaction among parents who utilize these options. It has been said that the definition of insanity is that you keep doing the same thing but you expect different results. Public education has been doing the same thing for decades and the results keep getting worse. It is time for change. School choice and charter schools are viable options. They must be considered. Betsy DeVos will foster that!

See *The Economist* (3 December 2016), pp. 12, 21-22 and (10 December 2016), pp. 59-61; Paul E. Peterson in the *Wall Street Journal* (13 December 2016); and Ingrid Jacques in the *Wall Street Journal* (10-11 December 2016).