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Why We Need to Save Our Public Education System From Trump

Trump's executive order to dismantle the Department of Education is an egregious act by the president and a contingent of far-right politicians to replace the public education system with a for-profit private voucher system. At the same time, it is an attempt to impose a conservative ideology of the far-right, by attacking students' civil rights, enshrined and protected by the Department of Education, within the academic institutions, which are being threatened by the withholding of funds, and threats of criminal indictment for fostering LGBTQ+ and gender rights, Critical Race Education (CRE), and free speech. I will argue that the effects of these policies will greatly increase inequality in society by weakening our public education system and reducing resources to provide quality universal education. Moreover, I avow that while our public education system is imperfect, and reforms such as certain kinds of school choice could bring welcome changes to students' education, public schools remain a necessary institution that guarantees children the right to a free and equal education, and an invaluable platform for educating a pluralistic citizenry. On the other hand, a private voucher system will further silo already divided groups of people and increase societal inequality, by giving greater power to the dominant group while reducing the educational resources available to low-income and historically marginalized people. Therefore, students, parents, educators, and concerned citizens must resist the move to replace public education with a private voucher system and fight back against DEI-based attacks against schools and educators.

Following the announcement by Trump's executive order to dismantle the Department of Education, onlookers are bracing for a total ideological shift in the education system, including K-12 and higher education, as education has been a focal point of the so-called "culture wars." According to CNN, "Mask mandates, the teaching of Critical Race Theory, and trans rights are turning public schools into a cultural and ideological battleground" ("Democrats Fight Back"). With this executive order, the Trump administration and conservative leaders such as former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and Kevin Roberts, the head of the Heritage Foundation, have laid out their vision for the future of our country's education system. One of the first acts is publicly condemning the education system's pluralistic foundation. Trump is openly making the fight for education one that is against Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and "wokeism" in schools. As *CNN* goes on to say:

Feuds over education encapsulate wider clashes -- over race and the identity of America itself... They tap into a feeling often found among Republican voters from outside liberal coastal cities that the country's quintessential culture and history is threatened by a newly diverse population and fast-changing social mores. This brews a "take our country back" mentality that Trump constantly fuels. ("Democrats Fight Back")

In an unprecedented takeover of the education system that threatens the nonsectarian and secular foundation of public education, the Trump administration plans to funnel public school money to for-profit private schools and religious academies. It is a revamped education policy of Trump's first term, and the efforts of his former administration's Secretary of Education, the billionaire philanthropist Betsy DeVos. According to *The New York Times*, "[DeVos] had two main [priorities], cultural conservatism... [and] to get as much funding for public schools as possible in the hands of parents so they could make choices to go to private school or homeschool their

kids” (Severson et al.). Furthermore, in a document titled Project 2025, the president of the Heritage Foundation, Kevin Roberts, outlined the means of imposing cultural conservatism in the education system and expanding school choice. In an article for *Progressive* magazine titled “Why Trump Can’t Disavow His Support for Project 2025,” Cunningham points out, “[Roberts] outlined the right’s education goals in a 2017 memo to Trump and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos to end public education in favor of free-market private schools, church schools, and home schools as the normative American practice” (34). While conservative ideology may be the narrative behind why Trump and his political strategists, like DeVos and Roberts, are pushing for education reform, there is a clear economic consequence and incentive for private schools, as well. The economic mechanism of this new education system was set in motion by the recent executive order. In an interview with Amy Goodman on *Democracy Now* educational author Jennifer Berkshire commented that the “vision” for the education system that was laid out in Project 2025 was, “sending funding back to the states in the form of block grants...to devote an increasing percentage of their education dollars to private and religious schools” (“Trump vs. Public Education”). Therefore, dismantling the DOE proposes a defunding of public schools and a transfer of public education spending to private schools and money for homeschooling. In Cunningham’s words again, “That’s what 'school choice' means: Pay to send your kids to for-profit corporate schools, indoctrinate them at Christian nationalist schools, or you’re on your own” (34).

It appears that the Trump administration’s goal for the future of education is, on the one hand, to save money on public education by gutting the Department of Education. On the other hand, simultaneously, the Trump administration is attacking the motives and credibility of public schools by leveraging the anger that conservative parents have about what is being taught in the

classroom. By focusing on the ideological battle over what should be taught to children, Trump is doing the double-duty of justifying the cuts at the Department of Education, and pushing parents towards for-profit private school vouchers. What is at stake is the educational rights of all children, because the Department of Education's historic role is to ensure, by law, that every student residing within the US, regardless of their identity, has equal educational opportunity. An article in *The Baffler Magazine* by education author Jennifer Berkshire, reminds readers that a principal function of the Department of Education is to oversee Title I funding for low-income schools, enforce the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and manage Pell Grants that offer college loans to low-income students. However, the Trump administration is now aiming to remove these social programs. Berkshire explains, "All of these functions are intended to give students the same opportunities. And because of that, they are essentially DEI under the Trump administration's increasingly expansive definition" ("Cruel to Your School"). By using DEI as an excuse to cut these vastly popular programs, Trump is saving money that he plans to use for tax cuts for billionaires. At the same time, he's rolling back the civil rights laws around education to facilitate the privatization of education and ensure that for-profit private schools meet the new national education standards.

Beyond removing the civil rights laws and social programs embedded in the Department of Education, or perhaps as a decoy to distract the public's attention away from their removal, the Trump administration is attacking public school curriculum and penalizing, even criminalizing, schools and teachers who would continue to support it. For instance, accompanying the recent executive order to dismantle the Department of Education, the White House released a "Dear Colleague" letter to every public K-12 school and college. This letter threatens any school that continues with DEI initiatives, including curriculum or activities that conservative leaders

oppose, with the loss of federal funding. In an interview with Amy Goodman on the *Democracy Now* news station, Berkshire responded, “[Under Trump] The department is saying now, 'You know what? We are no longer going to enforce your right. Instead, we’re going to turn what’s left of our civil rights division into a sort of weaponized lean machine that goes after alleged acts of antisemitism, and then also things that they suspect of having to do with gender ideology’” (“Trump vs. Public Education”). The truth is, Trump and his allies have garnered support for their anti-DEI in schools by using false and inflammatory statements to rally conservative parents against what the administration views as inappropriate educational content. For example, the book ban campaign led by conservative parent groups across the nation targeted books with LGBTQ+ characters, and history books, labeled CRE by the conservative media, that included facts about the history of ethnic and racial groups. According to Cunningham, “Project 2025 is taking things further with a plan to criminalize teachers and librarians. In the document’s forward, Heritage President Kevin Roberts wrote: “Pornography should be outlawed. The people who produce and distribute it should be imprisoned. Educators and public librarians who purvey it should be classed as registered sex offenders,” (34). To be clear, the “pornography” that Roberts referred to is the LGBTQ+ stories found in school libraries and curriculum. By using this false and embellished language, Roberts is seeking to alarm parents and win over public favor in the conservative anti-public education campaign, which, for their part, is now in the process of installing in its place a conservative and religious school voucher program to replace public schools.

The recent iteration of the school choice movement is a response to what many republicans believe is liberal indoctrination that is occurring in public schools and colleges. However, school choice has been widely debated since the 1960s as an alternative to the public

education system. Even across the political spectrum, some people agree that our education system is broken and that reform is necessary. Keep in mind, there are different school choice options, depending on what educational philosophy you believe in. The book *The American Dream and the Public Schools* discusses three types of school choice. First among the school choice options are magnet schools, which were initiated in the 1960's explicitly to aid in desegregation, by setting goals for racial and class diversity on the grounds of promoting equal opportunity (Hochschild and Scovronick 109). Magnet schools are an example of promoting equality within public education and allowing students and families to exercise a choice of schools through intra-district and inter-district transfer. One could argue that this form of school choice would benefit society because it offers a solution to segregation by race and economic class. Charter schools are a second type of school choice, "[They are] a hybrid between public and private schools... freed from many, though not all, regulations governing public schools, and they have more leeway to choose students, pick staff, design curricula, and create a particular atmosphere than do regular schools" (Hochschild and Scovronick 109). Charter schools are popular among students, parents, and educators who feel that the traditional public school system is too rigid and prescriptive. However, the exclusivity of charter schools, the right for them to choose their students (even though they are technically free and open to the public), is a concern if their admission criteria are not equitable for students across different social, economic, and racial demographics. Nevertheless, magnet and charter schools with their intentionality for inclusion of diverse student population, have garnered support by educational reformers of all political backgrounds who want schools to be more racially and economically integrated, and or, to better suit their student's needs by offering a more tailored curriculum to fit the particular population of learners. Finally, a third option of school choice is private schools. At this level,

education “moves out of the public arena into private and sometimes parochial schools” (Hochschild and Scovronick 109). This is just the type of school choice that the Trump administration is promoting, and which governors from republican states are moving swiftly to implement. These for-profit schools are void of educational laws that guarantee equal opportunity for students, and create an exclusive barrier for students who are denied admission. Therefore, while there is good reason to believe that school choice could improve the quality of education for some students, it’s important to note that the Trump administration is paving the way for a specific type of school choice, one that favors the for-profit private school model, which is precisely the form of school choice that lacks social justice goals, and which is the furthest removed from our current public school system that seeks to educate all students regardless of their identity.

Without a doubt, the polarization of politics is affecting our schools to such an extent that families of different political beliefs do not want their students to be educated within the same system. For this reason, school choice can be seen as a win-win opportunity to educate students based on the parents’ wishes. On the other hand, public schools are the only institution that involves all citizens [across different demographics] for a large fraction of their lives, and it is thus essential for our democracy (110). Because when students and families are forced to interact in public schools, there is a necessity to work together and cooperate despite differences in beliefs and opinions, just like in a functioning democracy. Additionally, even magnet schools and charter schools, while they may boast a diversity and equity mission, were first exercised in the US by Southern parents in the 1950s in an attempt to avoid desegregation orders. School choice has, as Hochschild and Scovronick point out in this example from the time of *Brown v. Board*, always been an excuse to avoid interacting with groups that you don’t like, “In principle black

parents were permitted to transfer their children to better, predominantly white schools; in practice they were strongly discouraged from applying to these schools and excluded if they did” (111). Therefore, if exclusion based on race, socio-economic status, and ability is already a concern with magnet and charter schools, then a form of school choice where families pay for private schools using vouchers raises even greater concerns of exclusion. According to an article from *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*:

Any unrestricted educational choice program is likely to increase racial and socioeconomic stratification of schools... For example, low-income families would be disproportionately affected if the government did not pay for transportation to the chosen schools, if voucher schools were allowed to charge fees and tuition in addition to the amount of voucher, if schools were allowed to select their students or if low-income families have less access to information than did high-income families. (Ladd 12)

According to this statement about school choice, if there are no diversity and equity safeguards in place to guarantee the admission of students of all backgrounds into private schools, then exclusion based on race, socio-economics, political and religious affiliation, and ability, will, in our current political climate, especially, be inevitable. Finally, if schools are allowed to openly discriminate against students then our education system will soon resemble a medieval education system, where only the top 10% of the wealthiest people are educated.

In conclusion, there is a perfect political storm brewing which could decimate the free public education system that we seemingly take for granted in this country. While education reformers exist on every side of the political spectrum, very few, unless they stand to profit from it, would argue that a free-market education system, that can openly discriminate against students and create an educational hierarchy of haves and have nots, would be a viable education system

to have in a democracy. Under this Trump administration, there is a lot of concern about corruption and violations of the Constitution, but up until now, public education has been protected as a basic right of every child residing in the US. If we allow the culture wars to divide people, and criminalize schools and educators, then we stand to lose this democratic institution and the educational rights that have been enshrined in our Department of Education. Therefore, all of us must defend our public education system against the influence of Trump and other billionaire leaders who seek to privatize it for profit and ideological control. To do so, we must support our students and our educators with the public spending and the civil rights protections that they need to run a nonsecular and unbiased education system, which is a pillar of our democratic society.

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