

Guest Column by Denis Smith: School Vouchers Take Public Funds; They Give Neither 'Choice, Justice'

In a February 7 Columbus Dispatch column, Denis Smith, a retired school administrator and former consultant in the Ohio Department of Education charter school office, provides insight into who bankrolls part of the voucher movement and how these school privatization folks manipulate language to mask the reality of the voucher advocates' movement, which has the goal of privatization of the constitutionally-required system of common schools.

School Vouchers Take Public Funds; They Give Neither 'Choice, Justice'

The Columbus Dispatch | Monday, February 7, 2022 | 12A

Denis Smith

Discerning readers should examine the arguments of David Hodges of the Institute for Justice and a recent letter touting the benefits of a parochial high school education by diverting public tax dollars for private purposes.

How much blather about the so-called topic of EdChoice can Dispatch readers ingest?

The terms "choice," "freedom," and "justice" are used frequently in such arguments.

Let's look further.

When it comes to public funds, thank heavens we don't have options to choose separate police, fire, and emergency services, let alone public transit. Yet an entire industry of lawyers, lobbyists and legislators assert that there is a right to have a private or religious educational choice supported by public funds.

Then there is the term "freedom," a word used by charter and voucher proponents intent on convincing the public that they must have the freedom to choose which schools their children attend, again by using public funds in the process.

Never mind that another term — "responsibility" — is linked to the idea of freedom to denote the constraints on any action that might violate the rights of others to receive an appropriate public education, unhindered by reduced state funding that otherwise would be diverted from public schools.

Finally, we often see the word "justice" used by school privatizers. For example, Hodges represents the Institute for Justice, founded through seed money provided by Charles Koch of the Koch Brothers juggernaut, an organization established to keep millionaires' taxes low by undermining public services.

The Koch operation, with which the Institute for Justice is allied, works with other Koch affiliate organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council in distributing dark money to surrogate groups to attack every aspect of government and undermine democracy.

Let's also stipulate that the public school is a symbol of that democracy, where every child, irrespective of background, income, or religious affiliation, is entitled to a free and appropriate public education.

With school privatization promoters like Hodges, they skillfully manipulate language to distort the real issues we face today. In particular, the Ohio Constitution does not contain a single reference to choice, only to the support of a system — not systems — of public, and not private or religious education.

And there is yet another issue privatizers ignore: the Establishment Clause, a bedrock of constitutional government.

CC3073 2.11.22 Friday

Amid all of this, these same proponents practice projection, as seen where Hodges alleges that for school districts, children are “income statements on a balance sheet, and any alternatives to the public school system threatens their bottom line.”

Bottom line? We should remind Hodges that the CEO of one of Ohio’s largest charter school operators paid himself \$19 million in his previous job over a four-year period and then started another charter chain.

Such charter largesse indeed is taken from kids in classrooms to be in harmony with the privatizers’... bottom line.

Hodges also says we can enter a store and choose between dozens of cereals but have only one choice for education.

If we follow that reasoning, choices for fire, police and emergency services should be available to us as well.

Perhaps he should be reminded that we don’t buy our cereals from the supermarket with public funds.

Parents may have choices in acquiring a private benefit in the form of a non-public education, but public funds should not be used to support private purposes or support religious schools. We don’t need a law degree to understand that.

Let’s call EdChoice what it really is: how to derive a private benefit with public funds in violation of existing constitutional norms. That’s the real bottom line we should affirm when establishing public policy.

<https://www.dispatch.com/story/opinion/columns/guest/2022/02/07/ohio-school-vouchers-edchoice-taking-public-dollars-private-aims/9223391002/>