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Denis Smith: Vouchers aren't about education and freedom, but they are about disunion.

Denis Smith, retired educator/administrator/consultant in ODE's charter school office often writes about education issues. On May 1 the [Ohio Capital Journal](#) published his article regarding how the voucher scheme unravels the fabric of the social order.

The public common school has woven the fabric over a long history, but the voucher game plan will quickly diminish the social compact.

The voucherites know not what they do.

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Denis Smith

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In 2011, on the 150th anniversary of the outbreak of the Civil War, the New York Times initiated a series of essays entitled "Disunion" about a conflict the newspaper described as the time when "Americans went to war with themselves." The series ran periodically for four years as an attempt to mirror what the paper characterized as "America's most perilous period."

Those who pay attention to prevailing norms and the constitutional health of our society might update those two phrases to serve as a warning for describing the present.

If Ohio residents have read the opinions of Republicans ranging from state Senators Matt Huffman and Sandra O'Brien about educational vouchers, that ominous word disunion might inevitably come to mind. In the campaign to destroy our public education system by using public funds to finance private and religious schools through vouchers, these politicians disingenuously throw out such terms as "choice" and "freedom," seemingly innocuous words that instead have the potential to fracture our national unity.

Yet when the subject is choice and freedom, however disingenuously those words might be used, we don't need to look any further for guidance in identifying the glue that keeps us in a state of union rather than the disunion a profligate use of public funds will bring if educational voucher legislation is approved.

That glue is the public school, whose importance is enshrined in the language of Article VI, Section 2 of the Ohio Constitution:

The General Assembly shall ... secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the state; but no religious or other sect, or sects, shall ever have any exclusive right to, or control of, any part of the school funds. ...

Lest we be confused by politicians spouting their favorite hyperbolic buzzwords like choice and freedom, our constitution contains clear language, including the use of the singular form: a system of common schools, not systems. It is one educational system that the state is mandated to support, not thousands of private and religious schools that clearly aren't eligible for public support through vouchers or other means.

Such a scheme to support private and religious schools with public funds might also be construed as socialism, as another Ohio senator, Andrew Brenner, disingenuously described public education in 2014, a classic statement that gained him national attention – and notoriety.

More than twenty years ago, one observer described the dangers of fragmenting the delivery of education in a society, as a universal educational voucher scheme would achieve. Dr. Kenneth Conklin, a professor of philosophy and educational theory, provided this warning that should be heeded by Republicans like Hoffman, O'Brien, and Brenner:

If an educational system is altered, its transmission of culture will be distorted. The easiest way to break apart a society long-term without using violence is to establish separate educational systems for the groups to be broken apart.

Note the use of the plural: systems.

Conklin provides some additional advice for us to consider as Ohio and other red states make plans to fracture the public school system, satisfy their ideological yen and garner a twofer by also destroying public employee unions in the process. He also considers the importance of culture in providing societal cohesion:

A society's culture can survive far longer than the lifespan of any of its members, because its educational system passes down the folkways and knowledge of one generation to subsequent generations. A culture changes over time, but has a recognizable continuity of basic values and behavioral patterns that distinguishes it from other cultures. That continuity is provided by the educational system.

Note the use of the singular: system.

Make no mistake. The educational voucher scheme, fueled by dark money groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which itself helps to fuel astroturf groups nationwide that are intent on undermining public education, has enabled the pro-voucher and school privatization movement to achieve critical mass in the last few years. Currently, at least 15 states have some type of voucher program in place, and the number is expected to rise dramatically in the next few months as red state legislatures also bundle together other extreme measures, including abortion bans and voting restrictions, to further erode democracy and one of its symbols, our neighborhood public school.

If we are to continue as one society (note again the singular form), we must have one publicly funded educational system, and not thousands of other types of schools similarly funded. After all, this nation's motto is *e pluribus unum* – from many, one. The Republican voucher scheme violates that very motto, in addition to not ensuring oversight and accountability for how scarce public funds are spent in the task of investing in the future. Common civic values and traditions ensure the continuity of this republic as one people, with a common heritage provided by the common school.

In an essay, Senator O'Brien asks: "Why can't parents spend their tax dollars at the school they choose for their children?"

Really? The answer is quite simple.

It's about the constitution. It's about the meaning of a "system" of common schools," of *e pluribus unum*. It's about democracy, where we elect our neighbors to oversee our public schools and ensure that public funds are spent for public, and not for individual, private purposes, as vouchers are purposely designed to accomplish.

Republicans: it should not be about disunion. But your promotion of educational vouchers and the erosion of the common school, the symbol and glue that brings together each community, will have that effect.