

## **Jan Resseger's November 14 blog regarding school privatization sounds an alarm about school vouchers diminishing the common good.**

In her blog, Ms. Resseger starts with a review of vouchers being defeated November 5 at statewide polls in three states. She identifies that some private choices don't necessarily generate the public common good. The marketplace particularly harms the most vulnerable students and generally harms a majority of students. Her blog expresses that the current political climate may escalate privatization.

### **Will Trump's Education Policies Accelerate Support for School Privatization?**

Posted on [November 14, 2024](#) by [janresseger](#)

Statewide elections two weeks ago in Colorado, Kentucky, and Nebraska demonstrated exactly what has happened every single time referendums to support private school tuition vouchers have been brought to the public for a vote: [vouchers have never once passed](#). Most voters across the states have demonstrated their support for public schooling, and they don't want their schools undermined by the diversion of tax dollars to private and religious schools.

Donald Trump won last week's election for President, but despite his support for school privatization, and other far-Right priorities, [ProPublica reports](#) that, by large margins, voters opposed school privatization in the three states with voucher initiatives: "In Kentucky, a ballot initiative that would have allowed public money to go toward private schooling was defeated roughly 65% to 35%.... In Nebraska, nearly all 93 counties voted to repeal an existing voucher program; even its reddest county, where 95% of voters supported Trump, said no to vouchers. And in Colorado, voters defeated an effort to add a 'right to school choice' to the state constitution, language that might have allowed parents to send their kids to private schools on the public dime."

An important reason these measures fail at the polls is that rural and small town voters understand that dollars diverted from the state's education budget will be lost from their local public schools to the families attending private schools in cities and towns with sufficient population to support a private school. For example, the [Ohio League of Women Voters demonstrated](#): "Most of the public school population is concentrated in Ohio's 8 largest urban counties, and so is the private school population. The 8 largest counties have 46% of the public school population and 71% of the private school students... Public education is the only consistently available education choice in Ohio's 46 small counties, those with less than 8,000 public school students... Private schools across these 46 counties serve a total of only about 7,000 students." "Rural taxpayers underwrite private choice in the state—but not where they live."

People support public schooling because they know that public schools educate the mass of our nation's children. In its most recent report, the [National Center for Education Statistics data documents](#): "that in 2022, there were 49.6 million students enrolled in the nation's public schools." Citizens seem to grasp some realities that President-Elect Donald Trump has missed, according to his campaign speeches and the education policy prescription in Project 2025, put together by the Heritage Foundation and many staffers from Trump's first administration. When they have been asked to go to the polls to vote on proposals for vouchers, public school parents and citizens seem to have grasped the reality that public schools are universally available in every city, town, rural area and suburb, and they are publicly funded to serve every family without cost. Public schools are the optimal institution for balancing the needs of each particular student and family with the community's obligation to create a system that, by law, protects the rights of all students.

This blog has not yet considered the President-Elect's support for universal school choice, while [it has more carefully explored](#) the meaning of Trump's threats to eliminate the Department of Education and key programs like Title I, IDEA, and Head Start. Today the subject to explore is why the President-Elect's endorsement of Project 2025's proposal for the federal expansion of school choice should worry us. With

a GOP majority in both Congressional chambers now, it is possible that a federal school choice program could gain more traction than it did during Trump's first term. Betsy DeVos repeatedly introduced a plan for federal tuition tax credits to support vouchers in her federal budget proposals, but Congress never enacted them.

There is an additional reason for concern as we enter 2025. While vouchers have never been approved directly by the voters, during the past two years there has been a wave of voucher expansions across Republican dominated state legislatures. It is possible that wave of state voucher growth might be further accelerated by extensive discussion at the federal level, especially if [the philanthropies that have funded voucher advocacy were to collaborate strategically](#) to spread their ideological message.

There are several reasons why the expansion of the privatized school marketplace cannot replace, and must not be allowed to undermine, the role of our widespread system of public schooling, which serves the needs and protects the rights of our nation's nearly 50 million students.

### **Adding Together All the Private Choices of Individuals Doesn't Necessarily Produce the Common Good**

The late political philosopher Benjamin Barber explained: "Through vouchers we are able as individuals, through private choosing, to shape institutions and policies that are useful to our own interests but corrupting to the public goods that give private choosing its meaning. I want a school system where my kid gets the very best; you want a school system where your kid is not slowed down by those less gifted or less adequately prepared; she wants a school system where children whose 'disadvantaged backgrounds' (often kids of color) won't stand in the way of her daughter's learning; he (a person of color) wants a school system where he has the maximum choice to move his kid out of 'failing schools' and into successful ones. What do we get? The incomplete satisfaction of those private wants through a fragmented system in which individuals secede from the public realm, undermining the public system to which we can subscribe in common. Of course no one really wants a country defined by deep educational injustice and the surrender of a public and civic pedagogy whose absence will ultimately impact even our own private choices... Yet aggregating our private choices as educational consumers in fact yields an inegalitarian and highly segmented society in which the least advantaged are further disadvantaged as the wealthy retreat ever further from the public sector. As citizens, we would never consciously select such an outcome, but in practice what is good for 'me,' the educational consumer, turns out to be a disaster for 'us' as citizens and civic educators—and thus for me the denizen of an American commons (or what's left of it)." ([Consumed](#), p. 132)

We know, for example, that vouchers were first introduced in Cleveland in 1995 by Ohio's legislature as a way for the city's poorest children to escape so-called "failing" public schools. But today in Ohio as that project has grown, the state expanded vouchers by raising the income-eligibility level. This past year, the [state diverted nearly a billion dollars](#) out of the state's public school foundation budget line to pay for the private school vouchers. The recipients are primarily children who were already enrolled in private and religious schools where their parents were previously paying full tuition.

### **Who Wins in a Private Marketplace?**

People with power, money and lots of information are better able to operate in any marketplace. In the book he published last summer, [The Road to Freedom: Economics and the Good Society](#), Nobel Prize winning economist, Joseph Stiglitz does not write specifically about the privatization of public schooling, but he warns in general about the danger of markets as public policy: "Free and unfettered markets are more about the right to exploit than the right to choose... Standard competitive analyses in academic economics assume that no one has any power, and everyone had perfect information, and all are perfectly rational. They thereby assume away market power and other forms of exploitation. But in today's

world, there are some individuals and corporations with considerable power... There is a trade-off, and society must adjudicate between the winners and the losers. In most cases, it's clear what should be done: the exploiter should be constrained... One person's freedom is another's unfreedom." (*The Road to Freedom*, pp. 10-11)

### **A Privatized School Marketplace Hurts the Most Vulnerable Students**

Economist Stiglitz also argues that although market ideologues claim that markets operate by the invisible hand and improve products through competition, the market will inevitably create negative externalities (side effects), and only governments have the power to regulate private markets: "Key questions of economic policy entail managing externalities—discouraging activities where there are harmful (negative) externalities and encouraging activities where there are positive externalities... So, societies have laws, rules and regulations that reduce the magnitude of these externalities and their adverse consequences, with punishments for those who do not obey them." (*The Road to Freedom*, pp. 46-54)

Here's what that means for education policy. While federal and state governments can establish programs to expand opportunity for the children of the powerless, government-funded private school tuition vouchers pay for children to attend schools that operate without oversight and regulation. There are no laws to protect students carrying publicly funded vouchers when the private school selects children who belong to the religion of the school's sponsor, or the school excludes Black or Hispanic or gay students. Private schools regularly select only the students with high test scores. Although private schools frequently promise programs for special needs students or English language learners but neglect to hire specialized teachers or develop courses to meet those children's needs, the schools are not held accountable. Private schools are known for pushing out—without any legal consequences at all—students who are disruptive or low scorers. In public schools, by contrast, federal and state laws and the actions of locally elected school boards protect students' access to needed services and protect their civil rights.

### **Vouchers Drain the Public Budget and Divert Money from the Schools that Serve the Majority of Students**

Finally, vouchers drain state budgets at the expense of the public schools. The Economic Policy Institute's [Hilary Wething and Josh Bivens explain](#): "Vouchers make no coherent economic sense, and the evidence shows that vouchers harm student achievement and expose state budgets to large future obligations that are hard to forecast, even while they divert spending away from public schools. Our analysis shows that states that have introduced significant voucher programs over the past decade and a half have experienced significant declines in per-pupil spending relative to states without voucher programs... (T)he data clearly show that choosing to implement voucher programs takes funding away from public education. The public spending declines associated with the introduction of vouchers will reliably cause significantly worse educational outcomes and will harm kids in high-poverty neighborhoods more than kids in low-poverty neighborhoods. The rise of vouchers is especially damaging given that we now know what does boost educational outcomes: more spending on public education."

So... what will we get in the end if a new Trump administration establishes federal vouchers? And what will we get if Trump's plans excite a huge, ideologically driven national conversation that accelerates public support for marketplace school privatization while at the same time hiding the externalities Stiglitz describes? The editors of an authoritative book on the many dangers of expanding private school voucher programs, [The School Voucher Illusion: Exposing the Pretense of Equity](#), explain:

"As currently structured, voucher policies in the United States are unlikely to help the students they claim to support. Instead, these policies have often served as a facade for the far less popular reality of funding relatively advantaged (and largely White) families, many of whom already attended—or would attend—

private schools without subsidies. Although vouchers are presented as helping parents choose schools, often the arrangements permit the private schools to do the choosing... Advocacy that began with a focus on equity must not become a justification for increasing inequity. Today's voucher policies have, by design, created growing financial commitments of taxpayer money to serve a constituency of the relatively advantaged that is redefining their subsidies as rights—often in jurisdictions where neighborhood public schools do not have the resources they need.” (*The School Voucher Illusion: Exposing the Pretense of Equity*, p. 290)