

Susie Kaeser, with the help of constitutional scholar, attorney Derek Black, sound the alarm that the attack on public education is essentially an attack on democracy.

An article written by Susie Kaeser for a local Cleveland Heights-University Heights newsletter, leaning somewhat on an upcoming article in the [Georgetown Law Journal](#) by Professor Derek Black aptly connects public schools and political democracy.

The real issue with the EdChoice voucher private school system is that it is hostile to the constitutional public school system. It is a clever Trojan Horse. EdChoice vouchers shift public money from the public common school system primarily to affluent folks who never sent their kids to public schools.

Public education is a pillar of democracy

Heights Observer, Published by Future Heights

July 30, 2026

[Susie Kaeser](#)

Aug. 19 marks the beginning of the 2026–27 school year for about 4,600 students enrolled in one of the 11 public schools or two special high-school programs of the Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District.

The start of a new school year is exciting. For kindergartners it's the launch of their 13-year public-education journey, a life-transforming process that we provide as a community and from which we all benefit. We can all be proud that this opportunity is available to all children, without exception.

It will be the 101st year that high school students have attended classes at the corner of Cedar and Lee roads and more than 115 years since students began matriculating at an elementary school on the site of today's Boulevard School. Public education is an established part of life in our community and every community. It is the backbone of our democracy.

The school district's mission statement spells out its civic and democratic purposes: "Our schools provide a challenging and engaging education to prepare all our students to become responsible citizens and succeed in college and career." The district's list of values—excellence, equity, integrity, trust and respect—gives more texture to the nature of this public institution, this government body. Public education is a big and important idea—the basis of our way of life—and it's in trouble.

Constitutional scholar Derek Black explains in a forthcoming *Georgetown Law Journal* article that the founders "believed that our national experiment in democracy would fail without educated voters." He ranks public education with voting, separation of powers and an independent judiciary as critical pieces of democratic governance. Public education is the holy grail when it comes to preparing voters to participate in self-governance. The founders understood a public system was the only way to ensure that everyone had an equal shot at education.

According to Black, public education has five functions that make democracy work. It provides the literacy citizens need to deliberate, access information and make informed decisions. It equips citizens to restrain government from excess and preserve their individual rights and autonomy, and it equips them to resist tyranny. The legitimate exercise of government power depends on the consent of the governed, and public education makes informed consent possible. Finally, public education binds together a diverse population and instills commitment to the common good.

This 250-year-old idea has withstood the test of time, but public education is not secure. Lawmakers are rattling the system by limiting the core features of education in a democracy: freedom of thought, educator autonomy and religious pluralism. They have weakened public-school capacity and strengthened private education by diverting public resources from public to private schools.

Black calls these changes “democratic erosion.” They “masquerade” and are treated as legitimate public policies but they are direct attacks on democracy. The courts in particular have ignored the deeper menace posed by these decisions.

Black has sounded the alarm. I agree with him.

For now, the school doors will open, educators will meet their students, and the work of teaching and learning will begin—but not without new fears, limits and censorship, and not without diminishing the capacity to tell the whole story of our past, engage with the hard issues of our times, and explore the full range of ideas that prepare citizens to make decisions that sustain the power of the people.

Democracy is embedded in public-school classrooms. We have to protect educational freedom so public education can continue to enable democratic self-rule.

Author Bio: Susie Kaeser has been a citizen advocate for public education for 50 years and a classroom volunteer at Boulevard Elementary School since 1988. Her adult children are products of the Heights schools. She is active with the League of Women Voters and the Heights Coalition for Public Education.