

SCHOOL CHOICE READY TO ROLL

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The public school establishment had better fasten its seatbelts—the school choice movement is ready to roll. Donald Trump is committed to school reform and so are an increasing number of governors.

Our new president will have as his new Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, a strong school choice proponent. She championed the Indiana voucher program launched by Governor Mike Pence, our new vice president. Look for her to hit the ground running.

It is natural to fear competition—in any walk of life—which is why those at the top spend so much time looking in their rear view mirror. This is particularly the case when those in first place owe their position to laws and regulations that insulate them from competition. But the economic success of America is not due to monopolies and oligopolies; rather, it is due to the marketplace.

The same is true of education. The public schools have long been protected from competition by Democrats, virtually all of whom receive funding from the teachers unions. While there are many excellent public schools, there are serious problems deeply embedded in the system: the worst teachers are constantly defended—it is almost impossible to get rid of them—and the schools are top-heavy with unproductive, indeed meddling, administrators.

Only competition will change the status quo. The good news is that the need for change is the very issue that got Trump elected. Now is the time to strike.

There is plenty of evidence that the school choice movement is scaring the daylights out of the public school community. In December, there was a lengthy piece in *Mother Jones*, a left-wing magazine, on Pence's voucher program. It floated many myths that need to be debunked, among them being the idea that school choice is a failure.

The article, authored by Stephanie Mencimer, claims that a study by researchers at the University of Notre Dame found that in the first three years of the Indiana voucher program, students who left the public schools for a voucher school saw their math scores decline and English scores stay flat (as compared to students who remained in public schools).

To begin with, the math decline extended to the first two years, not three. More important, the study was incomplete: it was not finished and did not use the most rigorous tests available. It must also be noted that when students transfer to private schools, their scores often do not improve immediately; after an initial period of adjustment, they more often do.

"Perhaps not surprisingly," Mencimer writes, "the kids in these schools [those who transferred to private schools] aren't performing very well on the state's standardized tests." Nonsense.

In 2014, 90.3 percent of the public school students in Indiana passed the reading test; 96.9 percent of those in private schools did. In 2015, 86.8 percent of public school students passed this exam; 95.6 percent of the private school students did.

Over the past few decades, almost every study on school choice programs has found that they succeed: they typically record a marked increase in the academic performance of students who have transferred to a private school. That is what worries the public school establishment: the data are not on their side.

If they were, they would not be protesting school choice initiatives.

Another argument against school choice made by Mencimer is that monies spent on school vouchers come at “the expense” of public schools. In fact, as three Harvard studies confirm, public schools benefit when such programs are instituted.

Caroline Hoxby of Harvard’s Department of Education found that when public schools must compete with private schools and charter schools for funding, students in public and non-public schools do better. This is a win-win.

In Milwaukee, for example, Hoxby found “dramatic productivity improvements” in the public schools when school vouchers went into effect. She also noted a “burst of productivity growth” in Michigan public schools “once charter school competition reached a critical level”; there were “broadly similar” results in Arizona.

The Manhattan Institute, the most respected urban think-tank in the nation, studied how students in low-performing Florida schools did when faced with competition from students in voucher schools. They found that it was precisely in those schools—the struggling ones—where the most improvement was notched (a jump of 9.3 percent on math tests and 10.1 percent on reading). Most telling, low-performing schools that were not threatened with competition by vouchers failed to make similar gains in state testing.

The most recent study on school choice was published in October 2016 by Martin F. Lueken of EdChoice. His focus was not vouchers, but tax-credit scholarships. This initiative allows taxpayers to receive full or partial tax credits when they donate to nonprofits that provide students with private school scholarships. This program is available to individuals and businesses, and bypasses any direct subsidy to private schools.

According to Lueken, “these programs generated between \$1.7 billion and \$3.4 billion in taxpayer savings through the 2013-2014 school year. That is equivalent to up to \$3,000 per scholarship student.” Look for these initiatives to grow. They sidestep some traditional school choice hurdles while saving the taxpayers a bundle. It also makes it harder for the enemies of school choice to make their case.

Mencimer is also fretting over the alleged “windfall for religious schools” that school vouchers offer. *“Creationists, Catholics and a madrasa all received taxpayer funding,”* she emphatically said. Translated that means that bible-thumping evangelicals, parochial-minded Catholics, and machete-wielding Muslims stand to benefit.

Regarding the latter, Mencimer is jittery. She tells us that “a madrasa, an Islamic religious school,” was recently home to a man who tried to join ISIS. Now it is not every day that a so-called progressive will admit to being fearful of a madrasa. However, when it suits their case—trying to frighten the rest of us—they are not above playing the Islamists card.

There is also something else going on here, and it bodes well for the future. Those who share Mencimer’s vision are no strangers to bashing evangelicals and traditional Catholics—they do so routinely—but their bigotry usually does not extend to Muslims. This is a good sign. Not to be misunderstood, it means that progressives fear an alliance among these three groups, one that could prove to be formidable. Orthodox Jews and Mormons are also likely allies.

“Almost every single one of these voucher schools is religious,” Mencimer writes. She never explains why almost all parents who participate in school choice programs elect to send their children to the religious school of their choice. Nor does she explain why the Obamas, the Kennedys, and the like, always send their kids to private schools, while denying school choice to the disadvantaged.

Radical secularists, led by the ACLU, have been suing state laws for decades trying to kill school choice programs. But they are on the wrong side of history. In 2013, as even Mencimer admits, the Indiana Supreme Court ruled that the voucher program passed constitutional muster, arguing that public funds went to students, not the schools.

Even more encouraging is what is happening in Nevada. In September, the state Supreme Court upheld the state's education savings accounts, a program that allows parents who withdraw their children from public schools to use state funds to pay for private school tuition and attendant services. It is the nation's first universal school choice program, one that is likely to be championed by the Trump administration. The ACLU lost in its effort to strike down this initiative as unconstitutional.

It is because these church-and-state objections are not working that so many progressives have decided to choose a different tactic: they are attempting to intimidate the incoming Secretary of Education, rallying the teachers unions against her.

Already, the atheists at Freedom from Religion Foundation are sounding the alarms. They are accusing DeVos of pushing a "theocratic agenda to destroy public, secular education." Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, says she is an "insult to public education." And the reliably worried Huffington Post is warning the public about her "conservative Christian worldview."

Politico, a prominent website, did some scratching around and found that in 2001 DeVos said she wanted to promote school choice as a way to "advance God's Kingdom." Look for some inquiring senator to question her about this when the hearings begin. Had she said her quest was to "retard God's Kingdom," those who are now protesting her nomination would be cheering.

DeVos is no extremist, which is why she has won the plaudits of Father Robert Sirico of the Acton Institute. What she, and her husband, Dick, preach is common sense. "We both believe that competition and choices make everyone better and that ultimately if the system that prevails in the United States today had more competition...that all of the schools would be better as a result." Amen.

There is another strength to private schools that people like Mencimer never address—safety. When I taught in Spanish Harlem in the 1970s, I quickly learned that the number one reason why parents (mostly mothers) sent their children to St. Lucy's was safety: they knew their children would not be assaulted.

Across the street from where I taught was a public school. The violence was so bad that it had to be shut down. I sometimes accompanied my students home to protect them from gangs, and occasionally had to confront thugs—taking weapons away from them—who threatened my kids. But none of these incidents took place at St. Lucy's.

That safety matters has been documented by Paul Peterson and David Campbell of Harvard. They did an important study on the effects of 40,000 scholarships awarded to low-income families; the children were sent to the school of their choice. What they found, beyond academic improvement, was how "very satisfied" parents were with their school's "safety, discipline, and values."

Trump may be a billionaire but he gets it on this point. Last July, at the Republican National Convention, he said, "We will rescue kids from failing schools by helping their parents send them to a safe school of their choice." Yes, the schools must be safe, not just academically excellent.

How anyone can argue against school choice at this point is astounding. In 2010, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg donated \$100 million to Newark's public schools; it was matched with

another \$100 million. It was a monumental failure—all \$200 million down the toilet. Most of the money went to the unions, consultants, and other vultures. What did he expect?

In 2014, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio refused to support school choice, instead electing to give \$839 million to improve failing public schools. The results are just in: it, too, was a monumental failure. Of the 94 schools that began the program, three met all of their targets.

Trump's support for school choice couldn't have come at a better time.