

Why School Choice Won't Fix Education

President-Elect Donald Trump has announced Betsy DeVos as his choice to head the U.S. Department of Education. The pick is a clear signal that the Trump administration is intent on pursuing school choice, a fact that the wailing and gnashing of teeth among the self-interested educational establishment would seem to confirm.

But it is important to realize one essential fact about this strategy: It won't fix the nation's schools—not all by itself, anyway.

Education is a central battlefield in the culture war. Why? Because our school system is the one institution specifically designed to pass on our culture. And its chief problem is that [it has largely given up on this goal.](#)

Instead of passing on our culture, our schools have either replaced this older purpose with mere vocational training, or they have explicitly signed on to the cultural revolution and replaced education with indoctrination in the form of political correctness.

Programs such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and other “college- and career-readiness” initiatives are characteristic of the vocational emphasis. Environmentalism, multiculturalism, and other politically correct social initiatives are representative indoctrination strategies that have replaced an actual familiarity with the values and ideals of Western civilization.

These two impulses in modern educational theory—the pragmatic and the political—have worked in tandem to displace the old ideal of education as a cultural pursuit, a pursuit once considered essential in a democratic republic, a form of

government which relies for its very survival on a well-educated populace that knows its history and values.

In fact, although ostensibly conservative Republican leaders understand the menace of political indoctrination in schools, they have fled from the Scylla of political correctness to the Charybdis of vocationalism. Many of the chief voices in opposition to a broad education in the arts and humanities are Republicans such as Florida Gov. Rick Scott and Kentucky's new governor Matt Bevin, both of whom have pitted a broad liberal arts education against what they consider more important vocational objectives.

Ronald Reagan knew better, which is why he appointed William Bennett to be his secretary of education, and Lynne Cheney to head the National Endowment for the Humanities. Whereas Bennett and Cheney were outspoken about the importance of the value of passing on Western civilization, modern conservatives, ill-educated themselves on such matters, can see only dollar signs.

But Reagan's educational conservatism has been swept away by the increasingly materialist worldview of the modern conservative establishment.

If parents gain a choice over where to send their children to school and their choices consist exclusively of schools who are beset from both sides of the political spectrum, each championing its own retreat from an authentic education—conservatives emphasizing narrow vocational skills and progressives grinding their political axes—then we will have gained little.

School choice can help to reorient schools toward academic rigor. But that alone will not reform America's schools.