

Of the many cabinet secretaries in the federal government these days (16 at last count; President Washington made do with only 4), the Secretary of Education appointee is not typically a controversial one. The last one I can think of who engendered much angst by politicians was Thomas Bennett, who served in the Reagan Administration.

Until now that is.

President Trump's appointment of Betsy DeVos has been met with a tsunami of ill will from educators across the country. And 'ill will' is frankly putting it politely. I'm sure if you asked many of her staunchest critics, they would argue that they don't actually hate DeVos but only her policies. The viciousness of the invectives would, however, argue otherwise. There are a whole lot of people, a whole lot of educators, who really hate Secretary DeVos.

At its heart, I think the extent of the ire emanates from her support of vouchers, public financial support of non-public (private and religious) or quasi-public (charter) schools. Public school advocates see in such proposals the demise of America's long tradition of public schools and the economic, cultural, and political success they have contributed to in the United States.

But drawing a line in the sand against the idea of vouchers may also be creating a barrier to the promise of a good education for millions of students across the country. It is no secret that in the United States there are a significant number of really awful schools and school districts. After decades of efforts to improve these schools, they remain awful. After billions of dollars of federal expenditures (the School Improvement Grants Program which targeted such schools began under President Bush and was boosted to the tune of \$7 billion under President Obama), they remain awful. Millions of American children are essentially trapped in really terrible schools because their parents cannot afford to send them to other, usually private, schools. As an educator, while I'm not necessarily wild about vouchers, I find the reality of lots of children with little or no hope of a good education simply unacceptable.

So why not accept DeVos' proposal to offer block grants to schools for voucher programs? Such a program could, state by state, target those dollars to just those schools with really dismal educational outcomes. I would think every state has its example of educational basket cases in which students could benefit from the ability to attend a different, private or charter, school.

The reason this seemingly sensible proposal is unpersuasive to so many is that they view it as opening a door that can thereafter never be closed. Harvard professor Clayton Christensen identified, some time ago, the concept of 'disruptive innovation.' DI occurs when a new technology or concept or process enters a field in an area where no service is currently being provided but which then later expands and wipes out even the largest providers therein. Thus, for example, when computer mainframes ruled the day, the personal computer was essentially a toy which could not possibly compete against them. But slowly those 'toys' got better and better—faster speed, greater memory, wider connections, enhanced software—until they wiped out the lumbering dinosaur mainframes. But notice, there had to be a tiny area in the market

which was being underserved for anyone to even consider the personal computers in the beginning, a place where the PCs were acceptable because they were literally better than nothing.

Thus it is that public school advocates fear that if vouchers get a foot in the door, the market economy and the competition it will provide will make for better and better 'other' schools over time and eventually sweep away the current model of how we do 'school' in America.

Seem far-fetched? In Missouri right now, the legislature is considering expanding its existing voucher program, limited to Kansas City and St. Louis, to the whole state. Legislators began the program because it felt more and better options were needed for some children in KC and St. Louis and then, seeing the results as a positive, are now looking at putting the program up against all schools, many of which are solid and even outstanding. Just like those incredibly complex and powerful mainframes.

Thus, there is solid theoretical and historical basis for the fears of public school advocates. If a federal voucher system is enacted, it may very well be the disruptive innovation that permanently alters how we 'do' school in America. Then again, a disruptive innovation only works, presumably, if it really does offer a better option in an area that is un- or underserved and then gets better with time.

But, if it will only alter our current school model in America if it offers a better service, is that a bad thing?