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Rethinking the Notion of Public vs. Private



By Doug Tuthill

If red and blue are to carry little political salience in the Obama White House, then public and private should prove similarly uninteresting in the new president's Department of Education. These two adjectives, long used as hand grenades in the national education debate, are becoming increasingly irrelevant. Instead, school systems across America are forming joint ventures with private providers to give their students more options. The result is an emerging public education system that embraces customization and social entrepreneurship while defying traditional labels.

President Barack Obama already has signaled his intent to double federal funding for charter schools nationally. Charter schools come in all flavors, run by retired educators or community activists or city governments or corporate chains, and they now reach 1.2 million students in 4,300 schools in 40 states. In Arizona, one in every 11 students attends a charter school. In New Orleans, the ratio is one in two. Last year, one in every 33 public school students in America was served by a form of schooling that didn't exist less than a generation ago.

By most standards, charter schools would be considered private. They are privately owned, run by private boards, staffed by private employees, and typically housed in private buildings. But they are tuition-free, and their money comes from taxpayers through a contract with a state government or school

district. So are they public or private? As Mayor Cory Booker of Newark, N.J., likes to say, as long as they can succeed in getting students to read and write and think, it doesn't really matter.

Today's school systems have exploded the historical definition of public education. Public high school students might enroll in the privately owned International Baccalaureate curriculum, dual-enroll in a local community college, or take a publicly funded online course from a teacher who lives in another country. Elementary and middle school students are enticed by magnet and fundamental programs and arts academies. Private companies run alternative public schools, and private schools receive public funds to teach students with learning disabilities. The federal government pays for private tutors for many struggling low-income students. And the best public high school aeronautics program in my state, Florida, is run by Embry-Riddle University, a private institution.

Within this expanding definition of public education, scholarships such as those in the District of Columbia and Florida that enable low-income students to attend private schools are unremarkable.

But that hasn't stopped some education groups, most notably the National School Boards Association and the American Federation of Teachers, from asserting that voucher and tax-credit programs undermine public education. When AFT president and charter school operator Randi Weingarten recently spoke of the need to "put aside our

differences and assume a shared responsibility," and pledged that "no issue should be off the table," she specifically exempted vouchers. They "siphon scarce resources from public schools," she said, ignoring that charter schools are voucher programs, and that public funding of private providers is now commonplace throughout public education.

As a president who is committed to helping every child live the American dream, Mr. Obama can help bridge this unnecessary divide. Private is not always the enemy of public, and Florida's Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program is a case in point. This program serves more than 23,000 low-income students and is intended only to offer a different type of learning environment for students who often have the fewest options.

The program has managed to build bipartisan support over its first seven years, and in May of last year, the Florida legislature approved an expansion, with the support of a third of the Democrats and half the Black Caucus. Al Lawson, an African-American senator who is the Democratic leader in that chamber, said: "When you have a lot of poor kids in your area that need help, and you have people saying, 'We're willing to work with these kids,' it's hard to say no. ... I am the strongest possible supporter of public education. But I know that not every school works for every child."

Those who claim that public funding of private schools is a Republican attack on public education have short memories. Both Hubert Humphrey in 1968 and George

Rethinking the Notion ...

McGovern in 1972 included a tuition tax credit for elementary and secondary school students in their Democratic presidential platforms, and the late liberal icon Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York was among the idea's biggest advocates. In the 1960s, "freedom schools" served as an alternative to racially hostile school bureaucracies, a point not lost on the Rev. H.K. Matthews, a Florida civil rights legend.

"This is a flashback of the old movement," Matthews told thousands of tax-credit-scholarship supporters in 2007 on the steps of the old Florida Capitol. "It's a continuation of the dream."

In his epic campaign for presi-

dent, Mr. Obama promised to bridge the political divides in America. He can begin by assuring public school educators that private options are not an attack on the institution of public education. On the contrary, when done well, they expand and strengthen it.

"For decades, [we've] been stuck in the same tired debates over education that have crippled our progress and left schools and parents to fend for themselves," Mr. Obama said on the campaign trail in September. "It's been Democrat versus Republican, vouchers versus the status quo, more money versus more reform. ... If we're going to make a real and lasting difference

for our future, we have to be willing to move beyond the old arguments of left and right and take meaningful, practical steps to build an education system worthy of our children and our future."

In this rapidly evolving world of customized public education, that means moving beyond the pointless rancor over what constitutes public and private.

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