

 REPORT K - 12

America Needs Public School Choice, Not Private School Vouchers

MARCH 2, 2017 — RICHARD D. KAHLENBERG

We are in a moment of crisis for American public education. President Donald Trump and his Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos are pushing an effort to create the first federally funded national program to support private school education. In a nation long committed to a public schooling for students of all backgrounds, we could end up taking a critical step down the road to privatization of American education.

The threat is very real. I have been researching and writing about public schools for more than two decades. I also have strong familiarity with public education debates dating back to the early 1960s, having written a biography of Albert Shanker, the longtime president of the American Federation of Teachers and the United Federation of Teachers in New York City.¹ In my view, American public education is in greater jeopardy than at any other time in the last fifty years.

Moreover, this crisis for public schools could not be coming at a worse time. Public education is critical to American democracy, which itself is under greater strain than at any time in recent memory. Public schools are charged with teaching students an appreciation for democracy and what they have in common as Americans. Yet the new administration is bent on promoting private school vouchers, which decades of research suggest would be bad for social mobility and social cohesion.

This report outlines the threat posed by private school vouchers and their close cousin, tax credits for private schools. It assesses the state of the debate and the likelihood of enactment. And it suggests that the moment is right for proponents of public education to ask a critical question: Can “school choice” energies be funneled in a more positive direction? Students stuck in struggling and segregated high-poverty schools deserve better options. How can greater choice within the public school system be used to promote strong, economically and racially integrated public education?

The Threat Posed by Privatization of American Education

In the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump campaigned on a program to employ \$20 billion in federal funds for block grants to promote school choice, including private school vouchers.² Trump’s Education Secretary DeVos, has been an ardent champion of private school vouchers for decades.³

According to press reports, the administration is now considering a proposal devoting up to \$20 billion to create the nation’s first federal tax credit program to support students attending private schools.⁴ Although a less transparent threat to public school funding than a direct voucher, the tax proposal is “a

backdoor voucher,” notes Sasha Pudelski of AASA, the School Superintendents Association. She observes, “The end result is the same—federal tax dollars going to private schools.”

Either form of privatization—a direct private school voucher or a private school tax credit—poses several risks: that diverting precious resources to private schools will lead to weakened public education; reduced accountability and civil rights protections for students; further segregation of pupils by race and class; a reduction in student achievement; and, perhaps most importantly today, diminishment of our nation’s most important tool for instilling democratic values.

- *Diverting Scarce Funds.* A \$20 billion privatization plan would divert important resources away from the public schools, which educate 90 percent of American students. Given the strong body of research tying public school spending to higher educational attainment and adult earnings, any significant spending cuts associated with private school voucher programs raise serious concerns.⁵ Moreover, as more students leave the public school system to attend private schools, public education funding could enter a death spiral, as political support for well-funded public education declines.
- *Reduced Accountability for Test Results and Diminished Civil Rights Protections.* Private schools guard their independence fiercely, so it is quite possible that a federal program supporting them would not include adequate accountability measures for academic outcomes or civil rights protections for students. Public schools, for example, cannot legally discriminate based on a student’s religion. But in North Carolina, as Century Foundation policy associate Kimberly Quick has documented, publicly funded vouchers have been used to support schools that openly discriminate based on religion and sexual orientation.⁶ For example, Fayetteville Christian School received more than \$285,000 in taxpayer funding in 2015–16 even though the school declares on its website that it “will not admit families that belong to or express faith in non-Christian religions such as, but not limited to: Mormons (LDS Church), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Muslims (Islam), non-Messianic Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, etc.” The school also says it “will not admit families that engage in illegal drug use, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality (LGBT) or other behaviors that Scripture defines as deviate and perverted.” (See Figure 1.)

ADMISSIONS

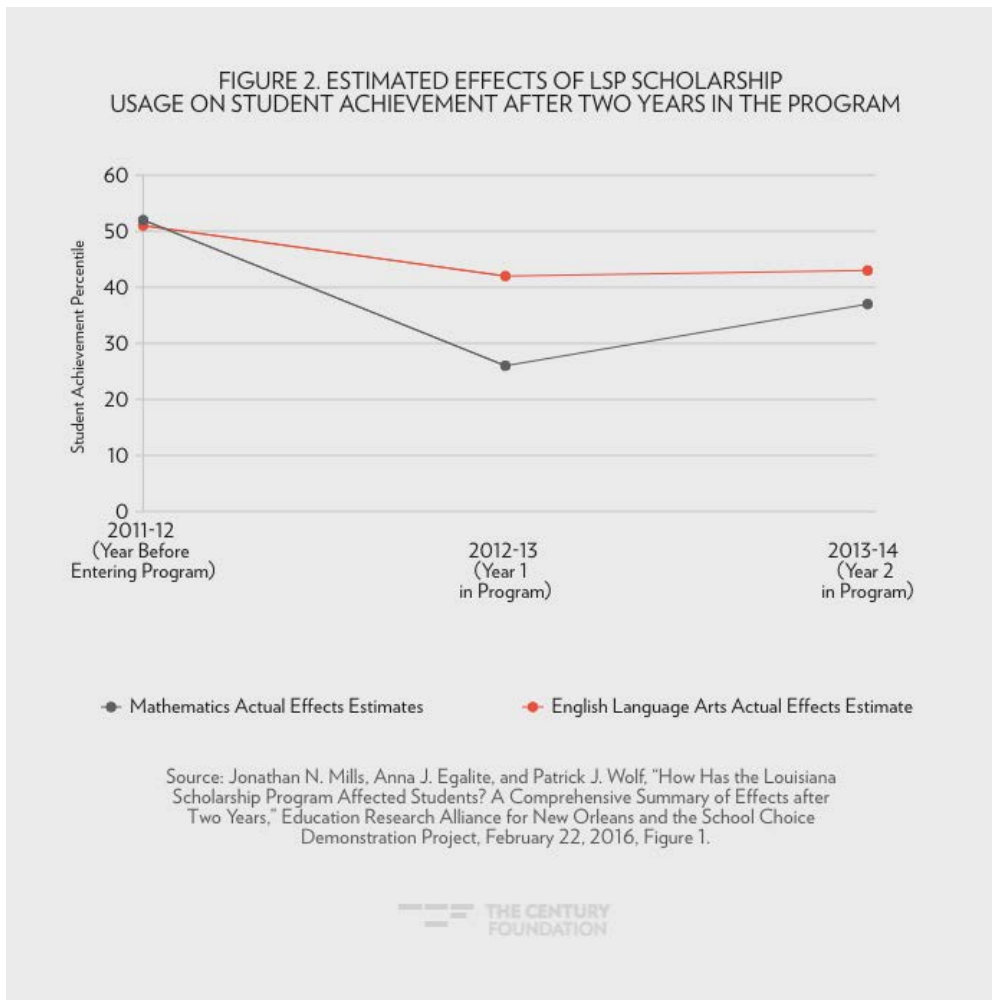
ADMISSIONS REQUIREMENTS

The student and at least one parent with whom the student resides must be in full agreement with the FCS Statement of Faith and have received Jesus Christ as their Savior. In addition, the parent and student must regularly fellowship in a local faith based, Bible believing church. Accordingly, FCS will not admit families that belong to or express faith in non-Christian religions such as, but not limited to: Mormons (LDS Church), Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims (Islam), non-Messianic Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, etc. Furthermore, students and families are expected to manifest by example Christian virtue in their lives both in and out of school by living life according to Biblical truth. Accordingly, FCS will not admit families that engage in illicit drug use, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality (LGBT) or other behaviors that Scripture defines as deviate and perverted. Once admitted, if the student or parent/guardian with whom the student resides becomes involved in any of the above activities it will be grounds for dismissal of the student/family from the school. The student must have at least a C average and be in good standing at his/her previous school. (Children must be 4 years old by September 30th to enter Pre-K or 5 by September 30th to enter Kindergarten.)

FIGURE 1. EXCERPT FROM FAYETTEVILLE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL STUDENT HANDBOOK, 2016.

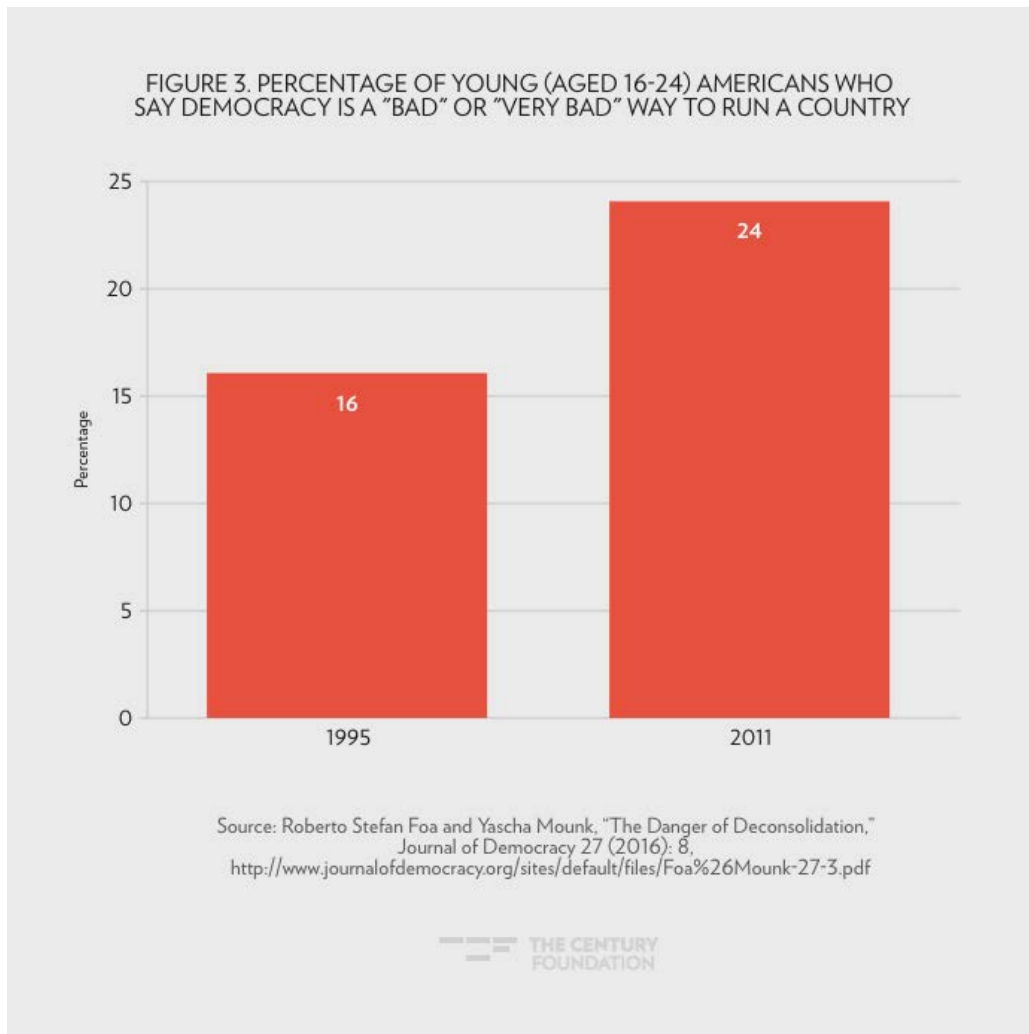
- *Further Segregation of Students by Race and Socioeconomic Status.* At a time when our nation is increasingly divided by race and class, private school vouchers could further segregate students. As Quick, Century Foundation fellow Halley Potter, and I noted in an earlier report, “Research on large-scale private school vouchers and similar school choice programs in Sweden, Chile, and The Netherlands suggest that in each case those programs have increased socioeconomic and racial segregation in schools.”⁷ A 2013 study on Chile found that school segregation by socioeconomic status (SES) increased in Chile as market-based reforms grew, and private schools, including those receiving vouchers, were more segregated than public schools for both low-SES students and high-SES students.⁸ A 2015 study on Sweden found that the use of private school vouchers was associated with increased segregation of immigrant versus native Swedish students.⁹ And in The Netherlands, a marketplace approach to education has contributed to high and growing levels of segregation of students by educational disadvantage.”¹⁰ Potter will soon be releasing an in-depth analysis for The Century Foundation on the relationship between private school vouchers and segregation.
- *Private Schools Do Not Have a Good Track Record of Producing Academic Success.* Martin Carnoy of Stanford University recently published a report summarizing the evidence of voucher programs from Milwaukee, Cleveland, New York City, Washington D.C., Florida, Chile, and India and concluded that “research does not show that vouchers significantly improve student achievement.”¹¹ The most recent studies are the most damning. As Kevin Carey of the New America Foundation notes, the newest research on voucher programs in Indiana, Louisiana, and Ohio, show negative results for students.¹² Douglas Harris of Tulane University points out that in Louisiana, for example, “students

who participated in the voucher program had declines in achievement test scores of 8 to 16 percentile points.”¹³ (See Figure 2.)



- Private Schools Are Not Designed to Promote Democratic Citizenship.* Perhaps most troubling, private schools are not in the business of promoting and strengthening American democracy and democratic values. As Clifford Janey and I noted in a recent Century Foundation report, this nation’s founders believed that for democracy to work, we needed an educated populace that respects democratic values.¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson argued that general education was necessary to “enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.” Jefferson noted, “if a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” Private schools can educate students to be intelligent individuals who can discern between fact and fiction, but it is not their role, or purpose, to foster a love of democratic values. The vast majority of private schools are religious, which means their primary purpose is to instill a love of God, not an appreciation for democracy. This lack of democratic mission is of particular concern

today, as young people are showing disturbingly low levels of support for democratic values that older Americans have long taken for granted. The World Values Survey shows that among Americans ages 16 to 24, about a quarter said democracy was bad or very bad, a spike of one-third from fifteen years earlier (see Figure 3).



Probability That the Voucher Threat Will Be Realized

How serious is the threat that a federal program to privatize education will actually be enacted? Traditionally, opponents of federal voucher efforts have had the upper hand. Republican presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush have all supported national private school vouchers programs, but none of their proposals has prevailed. In some cases, a Democratic Congress stood as a bulwark for public education. Likewise, some moderate Republicans have sided with Democrats in opposing privatization efforts. Although Congress did pass legislation to authorize a voucher program for Washington D.C. in 2004, Congress has never passed a national voucher program

that would affect members' own constituents.¹⁵

Opponents of vouchers benefit from what Hoover Institution scholar Terry Moe calls a “public school ideology.” He wrote in a 2001 book, “Many Americans simply like the idea of a public school system. They see it as an expression of local democracy and a pillar of the local community [and] they admire the egalitarian principles on which it is based.”¹⁶ Referenda to establish private school vouchers have failed in state after state, including conservative jurisdictions such as Utah. Earlier this year, two Republican senators voted against DeVos’s nomination to be education secretary in part because of her lack of support for public schools.

Today, there is also division within Republican ranks over federal involvement in education generally. As Molly E. Reynolds and Elizabeth Mann of the Brookings Institution observe, those who believe states and localities should take the lead on education may balk at a new \$20 billion federal initiative on school choice.¹⁷ Likewise, because vouchers have little relevance in rural areas that have few private schools, some conservatives from those regions may be resistant to a scheme that has greater resonance in highly populated areas of the country.

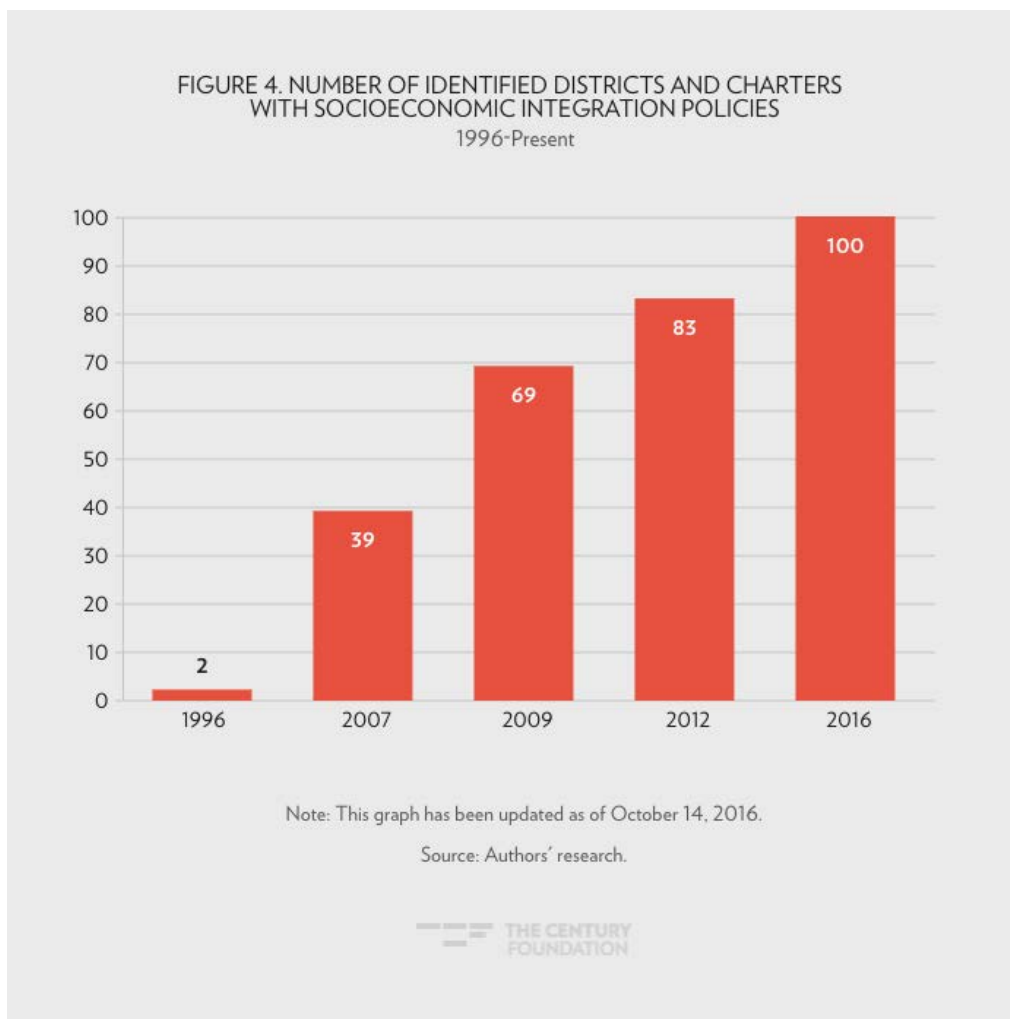
What begins as a modest effort for low-income students could expand over time and conceivably spell the end of public education as we know it.

Supporters of privatization, however, have a few advantages. For one thing, tax credit schemes take advantage of the public’s unfamiliarity with the real-life impact of losses to the treasury. The connection between revenue loss and a decline in funding for public schools is less transparent when private schools are supported with tax credits rather than direct appropriations. Moreover, a tax credit could be included in a larger tax reform bill that could be passed through the “reconciliation” process that requires only fifty-one votes in the U.S. Senate. With strong support from a president and education secretary committed to privatization, and Republican majorities in the House and Senate, a privatization effort seems more likely to pass now than at any time in the last half century. What begins as a modest effort for low-income students could expand over time and conceivably spell the end of public education as we know it.

A Way Forward: Public School Choice

Given the potential dangers, supporters of public education need to offer something more than a defense of the status quo. Progressives should take the valid premise of vouchers supporters—poor kids trapped in failing schools deserve something better—and suggest public school choice that provides those children an opportunity to attend high quality, socioeconomically and racially integrated public schools.

As Potter, Quick, and Elizabeth Davies have noted, we are experiencing a “new wave of school integration.”¹⁸ The number of school districts and charter schools that take conscious steps to educate rich and poor students under one roof has increased, from just two in 1996 to 100 in 2016.¹⁹ (See Figure 4.)

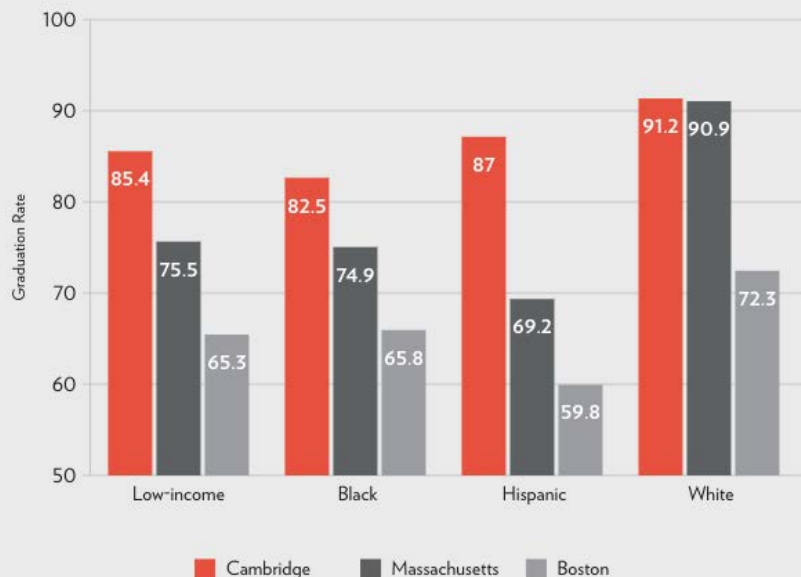


These socioeconomically integrated districts and charters educate 4.4 million students in thirty-two different states. The programs are found in both red states and blue states throughout the country.

While private school vouchers can increase segregation, public school choice programs that include fairness guidelines to promote diversity can provide a powerful mechanism for overcoming residential patterns that are often segregated by class and race. Magnet schools that have special themes or pedagogical approaches have long had the goal of promoting diversity. (And a small but growing number of charter schools are also intentionally diverse, as Potter and I observe in our book, *A Smarter Charter*.)²⁰ In Cambridge, Massachusetts, parents rank their preference among a variety of magnet schools with distinctive themes or teaching approaches and school officials honor those choices with an eye to integration.²¹

Fifty years of research suggest that giving low-income students a chance to attend economically integrated schools can significantly improve students' chances for success. In contrast to the very mixed research on private school vouchers, efforts to use choice to promote socioeconomic diversity has consistently improved outcomes for low-income children.²² Nationally, low-income students in mixed-income schools are as much as two years ahead of low-income students in high-poverty schools on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in fourth grade math.²³ Careful research that controls for self-selection bias confirms that the benefits of socioeconomic integration are considerable.²⁴ In Cambridge, for example, the socioeconomic integration plan has been associated with graduation rates for low income, black, and Hispanic students that are as much as 20 percentage points higher than comparable students in nearby Boston. (See Figure 6.)

FIGURE 6. CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, AND BOSTON—FOUR-YEAR COHORT GRADUATION RATES, 2014



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Cohort 2014 Four-Year Graduation Rates—State Results.

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Moreover, a growing body of research suggests that more advantaged students also benefit from integration, as the different life experiences that students bring to the classroom improves learning for all students.²⁵ As Secretary DeVos herself said at a recent magnet school conference, “experiencing and being a part of a diverse environment is really critical to the development of any young person, any child, any student.”²⁶

An Urgent Moment for Democracy

Efforts to promote school diversity through public school choice face political obstacles, just as private school vouchers do. But we may be at a moment in time when the public will rally around using choice within the public schools to promote social cohesion and strengthen our democracy.

After an election that left the country profoundly divided, many Americans may support the chance to adopt policies that will bring students of different backgrounds together and help mend the social fabric

of the country.

And many Americans may be open to policies that will bolster American democracy. For the first time in generations, large numbers of Americans are deeply concerned about the health of our democratic institutions. Never before have we seen a candidate elected president who challenged a series of cherished American ideals, from freedom of religion to freedom of the press to the independence of the judiciary. What set Donald Trump apart, said University of Texas historian Jeffrey Tulis, is that “no other previous major party presidential candidate has felt so unconstrained by ...constitutional norms.”²⁷

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The fragility of the democracy today may, in the end, be the very strongest argument for preserving public education. But here is the rub: public schools can best serve our democracy when they are socioeconomically and racially integrated. Integrated schools promote social mobility and reduce the economic hopelessness that allows demagogues to thrive. Integrated schools make it harder for authoritarian candidates to vilify and scapegoat minorities. And integrated schools underline the democratic message that in America, we are all social equals. We should find creative ways to give students stuck in bad schools better options, but those new alternatives should be ones that strengthen, rather than undermine, our democracy.

Notes

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