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Private Schools are for Private Fools

Education is under attack. Whether it is from parents, state governments, or Donald Trump, America rings with the call for increased privatization of K-12 education. Proponents continue to promote it as a fix for the perpetual struggles of public schools, but it is questionable whether the ire is misdirected. The modern theory of private schools arose largely from the writings of economist Milton Friedman. In the 1950's, Friedman argued that government schools are superfluous and highly inefficient, and while the government can continue to fund education through vouchers for private school students, they must stay out of its administration (Friedman). According to him, only in this way can competition wear down the government's monopoly on education. However, these ideals have been counterproductive and disastrous, only serving to wear down the education system as a whole. Private K-12 schools draw students from public schools with promises of innovation and excellence – but instead perpetuate a deeply embedded social and racial divide without improving educational outcomes for their students nor others. This burden on the success of the education system should be banned by the United States.

Friedman was correct when he said private schools create competition. They encourage a race to the top, where the upper echelon of society enrolls their own children in the costliest private schools, simply directing funds away from those who need it, and reinforcing deep class inequalities. Paying taxes is not enough to offset their damage to the public school system

– since “all states rely on some metric of student counts to calculate K-12 per-pupil funding” (Abraham), they reduce both state revenue and funding for public schools. This issue is only deepening – as 15 states have already introduced voucher programs for private school students, and more plan to do so. These vouchers for private schools are “not well-targeted toward students from families with low incomes,” and they indeed sometimes come with “tax cuts” (Hinh). This is yet another example of private schools diverting funds from the public and giving them to the upper class of people through private education as a means of enforcing economic inequality. Perhaps more importantly, private schools enforce social inequality on economic lines. The most expensive private schools, full of affluent students, help form a network with which each student can improve their own life outcomes; since these “social clubs” are inherently exclusionary (Abraham), they increase barriers for success for public school students. The fundamental issue is the commoditization of education. A greater investment by students in their education leads to superior economic outcomes – vouchers or not, this only reinforces economic inequality for those who cannot pay as much and undermines the worth of public schools. The result is dire, as “the rich kids will inevitably get more value out of their private school education... in terms of connections, aspirations, ambitions, and self-worth” (Abraham). Education will cease to be a commodity as soon as private schools are banned. Otherwise, the current free market for education, by allowing school choice, will continue to allow free rein for society’s inequality to run rampant.

This “school choice” movement of private schools ignores the fact that any market theory of education falls apart when the private will of people participating in the educational market conflicts with the public good; here, it embeds social stratification into society. The traditional view on private education rests upon the political goal of individual freedom at all costs –

freedom of school choice, and freedom from the “indoctrination” of nationalized education (Friedman). This libertarian viewpoint can allow this quest for freedom to supersede the public good. Even without its dark history, it is easy to see how private education can easily be abused on the basis of class, race, or gender to exacerbate social differences and inequalities. This is supported by historical precedent: when white families sent their children to private schools to avoid integrated schooling in the 1960’s after *Brown v. Board of Education*, these ideas “protected segregationist defiance of *Brown* in Prince Edward County and throughout the South” (Casey). It is questionable whether the public can be trusted to attend the best private schools, rather than those that reinforce their discriminatory ideals. If education were a commodity that should only serve the interests of its consumers, then there would be no need for the government to regulate it – but as long as the government has the responsibility to educate its constituents, education must create the best outcomes for society. If one’s choice of school conflicts with that, they are attacking the principles of education. A world without private education would greatly reduce this ability to discriminate through school choice. Proponents of libertarianism form a distinction between freedoms that are positive (“provided by the government”) and negative (“from the government”), where the ability to attend private schools is a negative freedom (Casey). However, as long as private education steps over the equality of different groups in the country, it is banning private schools, not supporting them, that would engender a negative freedom – a freedom from discrimination. This discrimination prevails 60 years later – in measures that disproportionately impact black and Latino students, “students in private schools have reportedly been subjected to restrictions on how they style their hair and what they wear” (Hinh). So long as private schools remain, students will have no freedom from these

discriminatory rules at school, with no opportunity to be comfortable in their own skin. Only a blanket ban can drive at the heart of the social inequality in America.

The advocates of private education operate on a fallacy; the primary justification for private education, in that it leads to better performance in schools compared to incompetent public education, is not even true. Friedman's original idealistic argument was to abandon the inefficiency of public schools and "Let the subsidy be made" to private ones, "and a wide variety of schools will spring up to meet the demand" (Friedman). Thus, widespread private education should transform schools from a public service into a commodity – and thus subject them to the influence of market forces, including competition. Students would enroll in the school that best meets their needs or interests and leave them if not. The ideal result would be a world in which schools – both private and public – must innovate their educational approach to keep their head above the water in the evolving sea of school choices. The incompetence with which the government squanders its resources is touted as fact: President Ronald Reagan once stated that "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help." However, this falls flat empirically because the purportedly inefficient public schools actually outperform their private counterparts. The reality is that once one controls for factors that impact the student body of each type of school, public schools outstrip both private and charter schools in mathematical achievement, academic growth, and level of teacher training (Lubienski 91, 112, 114). Schools do not belong in the private sector –private schools motivated by profit cannot compete with an unmitigated public school system whose motivation is to educate. Sending children to private schools is simply depriving them of an opportunity for a superior education they will receive at a public school; such a blatant inefficiency should be banned. This concept is not just theoretical: Finland provides the best vantage point of the

positive outcomes of banning private education, which they did in the 1970's. Finland has some of the highest performing schools in the world, "outclassing the US" (Abraham), and with their teachers still receiving adequate pay. Through a deep investment in public education, Finland's empirical success leads one to question whether the benefits of private education are real or imagined. It is impossible to blind oneself to the reality that banning private schools is a tried-and-true idea, and the performance of schools will flourish as a result.

Without a ban, private schools will continue to exacerbate the social, racial, and economic issues of this country, all while subjecting students to an inferior education compared to that which they would receive at their public school. The current habit of turning every service into a market, of turning every right into a commodity, is a foolish path for the country to fall upon. It is clear that education is an inherently public service, one that could only work if it were public – and sidestepping this fundamental fact is consumerist nonsense. Nowadays, everything must become a product to be bought and sold. Today they buy and sell education, and tomorrow they will buy and sell your soul. America must not fall into this trap. Only banning private schools will save education from the clutches of capitalism that threaten to overtake it.

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