

## Will Federal Funding Support Church Schools? Should It?

President Elect Donald Trump's nomination of Betsy DeVos to serve as Secretary of Education has the education policy world spinning. If confirmed by the Senate, Secretary DeVos will be the first Education Secretary who has [never worked in, attended or had children attend public schools](#). She has a strong reputation as an individual committed to providing families with options other than public schools for their children's education. She has supported private and charter schools with large donations from her family's wealth and served as the chairman of the [American Federation for Children](#), an education choice advocacy organization. While I haven't seen any indication that she is opposed to families selecting public schools for their children, it does seem that both she and President Trump will be shifting the Department of Education's focus away from public education and toward charter and private schools, particularly for children in poverty. It also appears that she may [reduce the role and influence of the Education Department's Office of Civil Rights](#).

The important questions to ask about these changes are: will the move toward more federal funding for private schools and charter schools be in the best interest of children, both academically and socially, and will it be a blessing to our nation? This is difficult to say. I am hopeful that Secretary DeVos, tag-teaming with Secretary Ben Carson, Trump's nominee for Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, will open new opportunities for inner city children, but there are many factors that would have to fall into place to make this happen.

Certainly there are many excellent private and charter schools in the nation that do a great job educating children. But because the students in these schools tend to come from wealthy families, or families who are so committed to their children's education that they make huge personal sacrifices to pay for the educational opportunity, it is difficult to separate the effect of wealth and family commitment from the effect of private/charter school programs. Also, the teachers in private schools and charters have an advantage over public schools because they are free of the secular shackles that limit the impact they can have on children, and are allowed to truly address the needs of the "whole child," including their spiritual and character development.

Because the problems of the inner city and children in poverty are caused by multiple factors, including the impact of crime and drugs on their community, a comprehensive approach that would enlist the support of churches, families, and top-notch educators to transform the lives of children may be what it takes to help children in these schools achieve at higher levels. But 37 states have "Blaine Amendments" to their state constitutions that prohibit any state resources from funding church supported programs including church supported schools. These amendments were placed in state constitutions in the late 1800's when there was a [fear that the Catholic Church, through parochial schools, would have an undue influence on the huge numbers of immigrants flooding the nation](#). The Blaine Amendments get their name from Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, James G. Blaine, who in 1875 attempted unsuccessfully to amend the US Constitution to prohibit public funding for parochial schools.

Individual states could repeal their Blaine Amendments to allow church supported schools to receive state and federal funds. However, there is also a very interesting case, [Trinity Lutheran Church v.](#)

[Pauley](#), that the U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to hear, that could place a dent in the Blaine Amendments. The Pauley case was brought by a Missouri church that applied for state funding to renovate their playground, which was prohibited because of Missouri's Blaine Amendment. The Missouri decision could be reversed by the Court on the grounds that the state funds would not support the religious functions of the Church, but rather the secular activities that take place on a playground. This case, like so many others, is likely to be decided by Trump's appointment of a new Supreme Court Justice to replace Justice Scalia, who could be the decisive vote to break a 4-4 tie on the court. The Court has not scheduled a hearing on this case yet; many believe the court has not scheduled the case because Missouri just elected a new Republican Attorney General who may decide to allow the playground funds to flow to the Church.

Once the door to government funding of church schools is opened, non-Christian – even anti-Christian – charters could also receive support. It would not be surprising to see Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, Nation of Islam, and perhaps even Church of Satan schools apply for and receive public support. States would not be allowed to prefer one religion or institution over another in deciding which schools received government funding, but would likely restrict the funding to supporting the academic program, not explicitly religious instruction.

I used to oppose to public funding of private schools. But as pressure has increased on public school teachers to support a secular – even anti-religious – world view, I have begun to think that public support of church schools could help reverse this trend. While I believe that the Lord will not be hindered by any state religion in spreading the gospel, I am offended when I see tax dollars supporting only one religion – what is becoming the state religion of secular humanism.

One of the strongest arguments against government funded private schools has been that the proliferation of schools with different value systems will lead to increased division, what some call “Balkanization,” of our culture. Christian faith, because we know it is destined to reach all nations (Matt. 28:19), could provide the glue to keep this from happening. This could be the missional challenge for the Christian Churches in America for the next decade – to commit resources to high quality schools in the inner cities. Public dollars could support the academic program while church resources could support optional athletic, religious, and character development programs all rooted in the love of Christ for the people of all nations.

Many CEAI members could be called to teach in such schools. Currently Christian teachers who choose to work in Christian schools often work for dramatically lower wages and inadequate health care and retirement plans. Perhaps the influx of government funding of these schools could level the playing field for Christian educators choosing to work in schools open to a Christian worldview.

**CEAI is interested in your thoughts on the ideas expressed here.** We can all benefit and grow by listening to the thoughts of others, especially when those thoughts are refined by the Holy Spirit in prayer. Members can express their thoughts on education and faith by entering comments below.

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