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Abstract

So maybe you [saw this cartoon](#) that was drawn by Glenn McCoy for the Belleville (Ill.) *News-Democrat* under the headline "Trying to Trash Betsy DeVos." If you didn't, take a look.

In the cartoon, of course, you see little Betsy DeVos walking to school, book in hand, surrounded by faceless men who are there to protect her. It seems to barely be working: there is profanity scrawled on the wall ("NEA"!; "Conservative"!; an anarchy symbol) and what appears to be a really juicy, nasty tomato thrown against the wall. For context, you might also be interested in looking [at this painting](#), because it's the one that obviously inspired McCoy to draw his. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Betsy DeVos, Secretary of Education, education policy, school choice, charter schools

Disciplines

Education Policy | Elementary Education | Secondary Education

Comments

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By Dave Powell on February 15, 2017 10:52 PM |

So maybe you [saw this cartoon](#) that was drawn by Glenn McCoy for the Belleville (Ill.) *News-Democrat* under the headline "Trying to Trash Betsy DeVos." If you didn't, take a look.

In the cartoon, of course, you see little Betsy DeVos walking to school, book in hand, surrounded by faceless men who are there to protect her. It seems to barely be working: there is profanity scrawled on the wall ("NEA"!; "Conservative"!; an anarchy symbol) and what appears to be a really juicy, nasty tomato thrown against the wall. For context, you might also be interested in looking [at this painting](#), because it's the one that obviously inspired McCoy to draw his. That one, which had the somewhat more suggestive and evocative title "The Problem We All Live With," was created by Norman Rockwell in 1964 and is considered one of the iconic images of the Civil Rights Movement. In it, Ruby Bridges walks, also flanked by faceless men (this time they are U.S. marshals, enforcing the law), to an all-white school in New Orleans to desegregate it. There is a racial epithet scrawled on the wall behind her. Ruby is dressed in white, a symbol of her innocence, and she carries actual school books. The tomato, in this case, actually looks like a tomato, not a body part ripped from someone's chest, and the setting in general is slightly less apocalyptic.

Let's get something straight right here, right now: Betsy DeVos is not Ruby Bridges. Betsy DeVos is not a six-year-old African American girl who has been denied access to a fundamental right by people too scared to acknowledge that skin color is not a sign of inferiority. Betsy DeVos is a billionaire activist who, for all intents and purposes, has bought her way into a position of power and influence over our education system despite having had almost no experience with it or in it. If we're in a place now where a powerful billionaire activist can be portrayed as a victim along the same lines as a six-year-old girl who had the courage to try to attend an elementary school in the segregated south in the 1960s then it is well past time to recenter the national conversation on race and education. Period.

What accounts for this absurd comparison? Well, as it happens, there is, indeed, a ["talking point"](#) associated with the idea that DeVos represents a movement to win back and protect the rights of aggrieved minorities shut out of our education system. The difference now, of course, is that the aggrieved minorities are not black students and their families who have been systematically discriminated against by people working within a social and cultural system that denies them

their rights, but instead are white families convinced that attending local public schools is an affront to their freedom. Oh, they won't say it like that. They'll suggest that they're really protecting the rights of today's Ruby Bridgeses, inner-city kids forgotten by a corrupt and crass political elite. But don't be fooled. For starters, DeVos *is* the political elite. Beyond that you can check the paper trail. Do you see any contributions to civil rights organizations anywhere in her portfolio? Me neither.

Unless you count [school choice groups](#) and the [Republican party](#) as civil rights organizations, that is. And, of course, DeVos' defenders do. To them DeVos is fighting the good fight on behalf of America's schoolchildren. I don't want to impugn her character—in the end, I have to believe that she probably does *mean* well, even if we disagree fundamentally on both the problems our public school system face and the solutions to them—and I don't want to make too much out of a political cartoon that DeVos appears in but didn't have a hand in creating herself. But I do feel compelled to point out that [250 education and civil rights groups opposed her nomination to be secretary of education](#) for a reason.

And I have a fundamental problem with the way school choice is framed as a civil rights issue. Maybe it's because I know too much about our history. Maybe it's because I'm personally offended by the crass likening of an adult billionaire government official to a courageous six-year-old girl buffeted by political winds she could neither control nor fully understand. I also can't help but be incensed by the upside-down claim that the Democrats who blocked schoolhouse doors in the 1950s and '60s are the same people [up to those old tricks again](#). Please. Anyone who doesn't understand the fundamental realignment of our two major political parties since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 seriously needs to go back to school.

Let me put a finer point on that: anyone who misunderstands our history needs to go to a school where history is actually taught, not some school where a modified version of the past that grossly mischaracterizes what happened is taught instead. Because if our history is not taught accurately, people may be led to believe that the true victims of our public education system today are not kindergartners denied access to education but billionaire government officials with an ideological axe to grind. Misrepresenting the past is as dangerous to the possibility of political compromise and comity, and to the actual functioning of our civic institutions, as anything is.

Look: school choice is an ideological issue, and its roots are clear. In the 1980s, as the conservative reinvention of our public imagination was gathering steam, so-called reformers couldn't wait to get their hands on our institutions of public life and deregulate them into non-existence. In the field of education they've been influenced heavily by the work of Milton Friedman, an economist who believed that parents should be able to choose where their kids go to school. It's not an illegitimate position, but it is a relatively unpopular one, and it's one that ignores the fact that school choice, as Friedman conceived it, exacerbates social and political segregation. These school choice activists first argued that public money should be used to fund private educations. When that proved unpopular, they turned to charter schools as a backdoor way of introducing their brand of choice to American parents. Considering that charters were originally conceived as an educational solution to educational problems, not as a social solution to a perceived political problem, I think it's safe to say that they've been more successful than

they could have ever dreamed they'd be—even if still, to this day, only 6% of American kids attend charter schools.

So school choice is a *political* issue, one wielded in pursuit of specific political ends. But it's not a civil rights issue. Equitable access to a good education is a civil rights issue. Nothing about the way we have framed this problem in the past two decades suggests to me that the real goal of the choice movement is to provide better access to education for people whose rights to such an education have historically and systematically been denied. If you don't believe me, [take the NAACP's word for it](#).

Are there charter schools that serve the needs of poor children and members of minority groups more effectively than traditional public schools did in an earlier era? Of course there are. But the evidence simply does not exist to support a massive shift in education policy toward privatization and choice. If anything, the evidence suggests that bringing energetic new blood into the public education system can yield powerful benefits under certain conditions. It also suggests that strengthening oversight of schools—not just charters but all public schools—is crucial to ensuring equity and promoting a more robust civic discourse.

So let me say it again: Betsy DeVos is not Ruby Bridges. Choice advocates have done a very good job of taking control of the narrative surrounding public schools, convincing us that public education, as we know it, is a failure. Now they're trying to convince us that school choice is a civil rights issue, that their advocacy is about giving people the freedom to do what's in their children's best interest, and that providing this choice will make our society more equitable. But we can't let them have this. We cannot let them take control of the civil rights narrative and everything that goes with it. We can't let them subvert all the work done over the past century to try to make sure America lives up to its founding ideals.

The real work that needs to be done involves ensuring that all Americans have access to a good education, not as a matter of choice but as a matter of course, and anyone who's serious about it should know that bringing people together—not pushing them further apart—is what we need to do to get there.