

News Journal Community Voices

Florida should commit to public schools

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Dan Kennedy, of Ormond Beach, is retired from a career that combined education and psychology, mainly in university settings in Oregon, Hawaii and Florida. He was also a licensed psychologist in Florida and Hawaii, and served as adjunct faculty at the University of Central Florida and Nova Southeastern University.

For some time now, we have been hearing about the low ranking of U.S. K-12 education, as compared with other countries that make up the developed world. This is also the case concerning comparisons of Florida K-12 education with the other states within our nation.

Low rankings in education are clearly a matter for concern. With regard to Florida, many state leaders are keen on using an education voucher system as a means of making things better. There are several reasons why this approach is not a good idea; reasons having both philosophical and practical implications.

History has shown that a strong, well-informed middle class with clout is necessary for the development and maintenance of a democratic form of government. Universal public education, a traditional hallmark of our nation, is one of the most important aspects in the maintenance of a strong middle class.

In the past few years, there have been legal issues regarding the constitutionality of vouchers, especially the matter of state-church separation. While the constitutional legitimacy question may not yet be resolved, thus far court decisions have seemed generally in support of public education. I certainly hope that this will continue to be the case.

One reason for saying this is that private schools are more likely to have a value agenda regarding social, economic, political, and/or religious philosophy. That is OK, and provides a service to families that want their offspring exposed to certain value orientations.

On the other hand, in a democracy, public schools should teach *about* the philosophical areas noted above, but certainly should not teach them, per se. This is especially important in an ethnically diverse society. For example, as a part of history, public schools may legitimately teach about different kinds of world religions, but should not be an advocate for any particular religion.

Proponents of voucher systems have proposed that this would help to improve public schools. There are some very practical questions that should be researched regarding this idea. I will mention a few.

How many countries ranking above the U.S. in academic achievement use voucher systems at the K-12 level? How many states ranking above Florida use voucher systems? If it should be found that voucher programs appear not to make a difference in academic skill and knowledge acquisition, then what are the variables that make the difference?

Might it be that the percentage of children and youth living below the poverty line is among the variables that make the difference? It is known that the percentage of children in the U.S. living below the poverty line (using official government figures) is greater than some countries that rank above us in educational attainment. The extent to which poverty could be a pertinent variable could be researched. Such research could include comparisons among nation states, and also among various locales within the U.S. as to relationships between academic achievement and degrees of poverty.

Another interesting research area would be comparing achievement levels of public schools with private schools and home schooling.

Actually there has been some research on these questions, but there is a need for more, carefully and objectively planned and conducted. Based on what I know at this point, I wouldn't put any money on voucher programs as a means of improving things.

In addition to a valuing of the separation of state and church and the maintenance of a democratic form of government, there should be answers to the research questions stated above before considering the implementation of an education voucher program.

Without seriously considering these philosophical issues and the practical research necessary for informed decision-making, the implementation of vouchers surely indicates a "giving up" on public schools, and may even suggest a plan aimed at destroying public education. The emphasis should be on finding ways to maximize the effectiveness of public schools.