

Debating Proposal 1's Impact On Education In Michigan

On November 7, Michigan voters go to the polls to decide on -- among other things -- Proposal 1, an educational reform issue that would require state mandated teacher testing and implement the use of vouchers for failing school districts. Vouchers would transfer a \$3,300 credit toward attending a non-public school of choice if the student were currently enrolled in a district with a graduation rate under 66 percent. Betsy DeVos, former chair of the Michigan Republican Party, has actively campaigned for the passage of Proposal 1 on behalf of the organization Kids First!Yes!. Former Michigan Governor James Blanchard is against Proposal 1, and is the honorary chair for All Kids First! Following are edited versions of their interviews with Colleagues:

Colleagues: Why has Proposal 1 elicited more passion from both sides than any recent educational reform issue?

DeVos: To supporters of Proposal 1, reforming education is a social justice issue. It isn't just vouchers, it's education reform in general. Proposal 1 is more than just a targeted voucher program for failing school districts. Proposal 1 also initiates statewide teacher testing and constitutionally protects public school funding. Every parent deserves to have the assurance that our teachers are qualified in the subjects they teach.



Blanchard: It has a tendency to pit private school parents against public school parents, and that is harmful for the education of children. The proposal is written in a very misleading fashion, and has provoked the people who are working in support of their public neighborhood schools by hiding behind a teacher-testing component. It is really a trojan horse that can affect all districts.

It would allow a majority vote by each school board to turn that district into a voucher system.

Colleagues: In theory, what separates vouchers from charter schools?

DeVos: Charter schools have helped give many neighborhood schools the incentive to improve by giving parents educational options, but overwhelming demand still exists, particularly among disadvantaged families. In Michigan today, charter schools don't offer enough choice to those who need educational options the most.

Blanchard: The principal difference -- and it is a significant difference -- is that charter schools are public schools and vouchers are designed for private schools. Charter schools are designed to reinvent education through new ways of trying to teach children. Many private, religious schools can and do discriminate, and the voucher movement is basically providing money for private schools.

Colleagues: What is the biggest effect Proposal 1 will have on the current public school system if there are fewer than 10 school districts not meeting the formula-based graduation requirements?

DeVos: Many Michigan public schools are doing a great job. In these school districts, Proposal 1 reforms such as teacher testing and guaranteed funding will go a long way in making local schools even stronger. Regular teacher testing makes schools more accountable to parents and taxpayers by giving them a quantitative way of measuring their area of instruction.

Blanchard: It would drain funds away from local neighborhood schools. A voucher system implies that there is a short cut to good education, and that is just not true. The status quo is not an option, but we ought to be looking at smaller class sizes, smaller buildings, more teachers, better equipment, renovated buildings and more unique ways of teaching.

Colleagues: Because private schools are not bound by the same guidelines as public schools, how could non-discriminatory access be guaranteed for all students?

DeVos: Non-public schools -- like public schools -- are prohibited by federal law from discriminating on the basis of race. Vouchers may not guarantee every child in a failing Michigan school district admittance to the most exclusive prep school in the state, but Proposal 1 will guarantee that every child in a failing public school system has access to more education options.

Blanchard: They can't, and most private schools admit it. In the First Amendment, the free exercise of religion allows (discriminatory access) to occur almost across the board. Non-discriminatory access cannot be guaranteed. We ought to be spreading excellence and innovation in our very fine public schools instead of paying kids to leave them.

Colleagues: What are the biggest fallacies -- pro or con -- about vouchers, and how would the system violate the First Amendment clause about transferring public monies to religious schools?

DeVos: Vouchers are not a violation of church and state separation because with vouchers, public money never goes directly to a religiously affiliated school. Vouchers allow parents to decide where a portion of their education tax dollars are spent.

Blanchard: The biggest fallacy is that parents and kids don't have choices. The fact is that now they have choice with charter schools, magnet schools and schools of choice in bordering districts. Under the guise of helping poor kids, vouchers will be paying private schools to do something they are already doing, and giving them a bonus.

Colleagues: Depending on how the November vote goes, who stands to win and who stands to lose if Proposal 1 passes or fails, and why?

DeVos: If Proposal 1 is approved this November, children, first and foremost, will benefit. Children trapped in failing schools will have a plethora of high-quality education options. Proposal 1 will lift up education for all kids in Michigan.

Blanchard: If Proposal 1 passes, neighborhood schools lose and private and religious schools win. However, those schools will end up with a lot of regulation they haven't bargained for. My guess is that the Legislature will force them to become more like public schools, and they will lose what they believe is their unique character.