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Trump's war on America's schools

The US president wants to destroy them, but most Americans still support them

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Of all the attacks on valuable things that Donald Trump is mounting — on free speech, financial reporting standards, climate regulation, relations with allies — one of the most dangerous is his assault on K-12 public education in the US.

The White House, along with many Republicans, would like to see the Department of Education disbanded and schooling in America privatised with a voucher system that would give parents public money to pay for independent school tuition. Not only does this pull resources away from already underfunded public schools, but it tends to support well-off families and religious schools disproportionately.

So I had a rare moment of pleasant surprise amid a truly dismal news cycle when I read, a few days ago, that Republican efforts to promote school vouchers have so far done very little to lower enrolment in public schools. A new study by Tulane University academics found that in the 11 states that had adopted vouchers since 2021, the system had only increased enrolment in private schools by about 3-4 per

cent.

Part of this may be down to the fact that vouchers can't fully cover the cost of expensive private schools. The people who are adopting them seem to be opting for relatively inexpensive (at least by private school standards) faith-based schools. But I suspect more of it is down to the fact that Americans as a whole, both Republicans and Democrats, largely support public schools. Indeed they remain one of the last shared spaces in the country where people regularly mingle with those who are different from themselves.

Given this support, it's baffling that the Trump White House has in recent months amped up federal pressure on how and what schools teach (something that is meant to be in the purview of the states), expanded the voucher system, slashed education budgets and allowed ICE into classrooms. Most families in America simply don't want all this.

But in another sense, it's right on brand. Vouchers were, after all, a Milton Friedman idea. The libertarian economist once said: "In my ideal world, government would not be responsible for providing education any more than it is for providing food and clothing." If public money can support more Maga children in evangelical schools, so much the better in Trumpworld.

It's also likely that the president may be worried about the power that teachers, and public schools, could play in fighting the disinformation and polarisation that his politics thrive on. It is telling that Mike Pompeo, Trump's former secretary of state, once said: "I get asked, 'Who's the most dangerous person in the world? Is it Chairman Kim, is it Xi Jinping?' The most dangerous person in the world is Randi Weingarten. It's not a close call."

Weingarten, those of you reading outside the US could be forgiven for not knowing, is the head of America's second-largest teachers' union. In her new book, *Why Fascists Fear Teachers*, she lays out some of the history of authoritarian backlash against public education and its teachers, from the post-civil war Reconstruction era in the

US, to Europe in the 1930s, to Vladimir Putin's justification of crackdowns on teachers and universities in Russia ("wars are won by . . . schoolteachers").

She also quotes the Canadian psychologist Bob Altemeyer, who found that a lack of "critical thinking" made people more receptive to authoritarian leaders. As he put it, "the very last thing an authoritarian leader wants is for his followers to start using their heads". Or, as Trump so memorably put it after a 2016 primary win: "We won with poorly educated. I love the poorly educated."

It used to be the job of the president to bring the country together in times of trouble. Since the end of the second world war, every Oval Office inhabitant would get up and try to soothe the nation in the wake of political violence. Trump, of course, did just the opposite after the murder of conservative activist Charlie Kirk, calling for a war on the "radical left". This could well include educators and unions, which have begun preparing for future assaults, with strategic action plans and the redeployment of Washington-based resources elsewhere.

Teachers are on the front lines of the terrifying political divides in America today. But public schools are also one of the few places that you can still imagine healing occurring at scale. Consider, for example, the role schools play in combating digital disinformation and mental health issues. Several states have recently passed, or are in the process of passing, "bell to bell" phone bans in which public school students are not allowed to use their devices while on school property. New York's ban started just this month, and early anecdotal reports from educators show that — surprise, surprise — students are less distracted and more likely to engage with teachers and talk to one another.

Public schools are also increasingly adopting "project-based learning", which means getting students out of their chairs and into the real world, working on experiments together in groups. Talking to each other is of course how we protect ourselves from the "atomisation" that Hannah Arendt warned that fascism feeds on. That alone is a reason for supporting public schools.

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