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Be wary of snake oil salesmen in education

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As parents and citizens who value our local public schools, we should be wary of dangerous and risky school funding policy proposals such as an Illinois tax credit program that would allow parents to send their children to private schools. This proposal is tucked into Gov. Bruce Rauner's amendatory veto of Senate Bill 1 as a bargaining chip to end the education funding impasse.

U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos also supports tax-credit scholarships. DeVos touts models from other states, including the Florida private school voucher plan. This controversial structure of school funding allows individuals and corporations to donate, as a tax credit, to one of four scholarship funding organizations (SFOs). These SFOs, after keeping 5%, manage the awarding of the vouchers to families who wish to leave their neighborhood school. The majority of families who apply for and receive tax-credit scholarships have chosen religious or sectarian schools; however, achievement at these schools' typically does not outperform that of the neighborhood public school.

Tax-credit scholarships are not good for the public. They are a work around to giving tax dollars to religious private schools and provide a tax loophole to contributors. Teachers at the private schools where tax-credit scholarships are used are not required to hold credentials; the private schools do not have to be accredited; and they are not required to meet minimal performance standards.

For decades, vouchers have been controversial. Voucher advocates argue that fostering an educational "market" where private and religious schools can compete in a financial open playing field will make all schools better. The assumption is that they can run schools more cheaply and satisfy consumer needs more efficiently than public schools.

Just what are those arguments that cause the majority of the public to oppose a voucher system? The following are a few fundamental flaws of the voucher reform movement:

- Often, families use personal religious or sectarian factors in opting for vouchers. This results in communities being segregated by ethnicity, socioeconomic status and religion. The community's sense of spirit and identity becomes fragmented and weakened as families abandon the local neighborhood public school.
- Most religious schools do not provide the gamut of services and programs to meet the needs of special education students that are offered in local public schools. They often turn away or "shed" these students, again creating a more segregated and exclusive environment. Even if required to admit students by

lottery, voucher schools can later ease out students who are not performing well or are not conforming to the school's mission.

- Voucher schools take advantage of the bigger teacher labor market by hiring younger teachers with no promise of permanent employment. They can run their schools with lower salaries and minimal benefits. This "cheap labor" results in eroding the status and prestige of the teaching profession, thus discouraging bright, talented candidates from selecting the teaching profession as a career of choice.
- Ideologically, school vouchers place a greater value on personal choice than the importance of equity, commonality and public accountability. Increased segregation and the loss of a common educational experience will erode the foundation of our unique and amazing democratic society.
- The research is clear: the factors that strengthen our public schools are investment in early childhood programing, rigorous high standards for all students, strong professional development for teachers and resources channeled quickly and efficiently to the neediest students. The research is also clear that choice and market incentives do not result in stronger local public schools.

We should beware of snake oil salesmen. We all should be wary of school voucher proposals, tax-credit scholarships and other risky reform policies. Closely monitor the debate about education policy; know the facts about how these proposals would affect your community; and urge your state representative to override Gov. Rauner's amendatory veto to Senate Bill 1.