

OPINION

MORE ON
More views and

THE GAZETTE'S VIEWPOINT

DeVos visit celebrates educational freedom

U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos will visit Colorado Springs one month from today to celebrate the 20th year of Parents Challenge. The national nonprofit empowers children in low-income households to escape failing schools.

Parents Challenge represents the core educational doctrine of DeVos, as we understand it: All kids, not just the fortunate few, should have access to the best schools.

Founded by Springs residents Steve and Joyce Schuck, Parents Challenge asks parents and guardians to exercise school choice and choose whichever schools best suit the needs of their children.

Not all kids are the same, meaning traditional public attendance centers don't work for everyone. Some students have complicated learning disabilities. Others are gifted academically, learn better kinetically, need a heavy focus on science, math, music or other forms of the arts.

In Colorado, about 250 public charter schools — serving 120,000 students — provide special curriculums focusing on everything from aerospace to fine arts to automotive technology.

Throughout much of the country, parents can choose from traditional public, public charter and private schools to find the best match for any child. We don't shop for cars, food, homes, or much of anything else without considering a large variety of options. Choosing something so important as K-12 education should be no different.

Parents Challenge has no other agenda other than school choice. It does not steer families toward charters, private secular, private religious, traditional public schools or homeschooling. It helps them pick from all of the above, without exerting pressure.

For low-income families, school choice can pose big challenges.

Private-secular and sectarian schools charge tuition and fees only wealthy families can easily afford. Attending the right traditional public or public charter school might involve transportation expenses and various incidental fees. Homeschooling comes with the cost of books, computers and an assortment of other expenses.

Whatever financial obstacles exist, Parents Challenge tries to help with scholarships and grants. In doing so, the organization evens the odds, assisting children from



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos will come to Colorado Springs in June.

low-income homes to pursue opportunities historically available exclusively to their wealthier peers.

Additionally, Parents Challenge hosts routine "parent empowerment" evening dinner meetings at no charge, guiding families in topics ranging from bullying to college prep to personal finance to career preparation.

The program expects parents and guardians to remain involved with their children's educations and the schools they attend. Toward that end, it asks them to record academic grades, standardized scores and extracurricular activities in a student journal.

"We are not philanthropy," Steve Schuck says. "We are partners. We help people empower themselves, and we say you have obligations on your end of the deal. We empower families with money, resources and information that all go toward improving educational options and outcomes."

To use the program, and apply for assistance, parents only need to visit ParentsChallenge.org to get started.

As Parents Challenge expands throughout the country, its mission reminds us of that great mantra promoted by the United Negro College Fund: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

DeVos answered a call to serve as education secretary to help develop minds that might otherwise be wasted. That is why she will travel 1,700 miles to the Springs, for no business other than to celebrate Parents Challenge as a gift to families, children and society's future.

THE GAZETTE EDITORIAL BOARD