By Doug Tuthill

If red and blue are to carry little political salience in the Obama White House, then public and private should prove similarly uninteresting in the new president’s Department of Education. These two adjectives, long used as hand grenades in the national education debate, are becoming increasingly irrelevant. Instead, school systems across America are forming joint ventures with private providers to give their students more options. The result is an emerging public education system that embraces customization and social entrepreneurship while defying traditional labels.

President Barack Obama already has signaled his intent to double federal funding for charter schools nationally. Charter schools come in all flavors, run by retired educators or community activists or city governments or corporate chains, and they now reach 1.2 million students in 4,300 schools in 40 states. In Arizona, one in every 11 students attends a charter school. In New Orleans, the ratio is one in two. Last year, one in every 33 public school students in America was served by a form of schooling that didn’t exist less than a generation ago.

By most standards, charter schools would be considered private. They are privately owned, run by private boards, staffed by private employees, and typically housed in private buildings. But they are tuition-free, and their money comes from taxpayers through a contract with a state government or school district. So are they public or private? As Mayor Cory Booker of Newark, N.J., likes to say, as long as they can succeed in getting students to read and write and think, it doesn’t really matter.

Today’s school systems have exploded the historical definition of public education. Public high school students might enroll in the privately owned International Baccalaureate curriculum, dual-enroll in a local community college, or take a publicly funded online course from a teacher who lives in another country. Elementary and middle school students are enticed by magnet and fundamental programs and arts academies. Private companies run alternative public schools, and private schools receive public funds to teach students with learning disabilities. The federal government pays for private tutors for many struggling low-income students. And the best public high school aeronautics program in my state, Florida, is run by Embry-Riddle University, a private institution.

Within this expanding definition of public education, scholarships such as those in the District of Columbia and Florida that enable low-income students to attend private schools are unremarkable.

Those who claim that public funding of private schools is a Republican attack on public education have short memories. Both Hubert Humphrey in 1968 and George
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McGovern in 1972 included a tuition tax credit for elementary and secondary school students in their Democratic presidential platforms, and the late liberal icon Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York was among the idea’s biggest advocates. In the 1960s, “freedom schools” served as an alternative to racially hostile school bureaucracies, a point not lost on the Rev. H.K. Matthews, a Florida civil rights legend.

“This is a flashback of the old movement,” Matthews told thousands of tax-credit-scholarship supporters in 2007 on the steps of the old Florida Capitol. “It’s a continuation of the dream.”

In his epic campaign for president, Mr. Obama promised to bridge the political divides in America. He can begin by assuring public school educators that private options are not an attack on the institution of public education. On the contrary, when done well, they expand and strengthen it.

“For decades, [we’ve] been stuck in the same tired debates over education that have crippled our progress and left schools and parents to fend for themselves,” Mr. Obama said on the campaign trail in September. “It’s been Democrat versus Republican, vouchers versus the status quo, more money versus more reform. … If we’re going to make a real and lasting difference for our future, we have to be willing to move beyond the old arguments of left and right and take meaningful, practical steps to build an education system worthy of our children and our future.”

In this rapidly evolving world of customized public education, that means moving beyond the pointless rancor over what constitutes public and private.

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