



ISSUE BRIEF

**President-elect Trump's
Education Secretary
Selection**

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Following his unanticipated victory earlier this month, President-Elect Donald Trump has started to announce nominees for his cabinet via a transition process that seems to match the drama and nonconventional nature of his campaign. After meeting with several well-known figures in education, Trump tapped Betsy DeVos, a Michigan philanthropist and conservative activist, as his nominee for Secretary of Education.

DeVos, unlike most of Trump's cabinet selections thus far, comes from a small group of conservative billionaires who have long been loyalists to the traditional Republican Party. (Her father-in-law started the Amway multilevel marketing company.) Since 1982, DeVos has been heavily involved in the Michigan Republican Party, serving as a delegate, committeewoman, and Chairwoman of the party from 1996 to 2000. Throughout that time, DeVos and her husband, Richard Jr., launched their family foundation and fastened themselves as consistent funders and activists for conservative causes in education and community.

BACKGROUND

During the 1990s, DeVos served on the boards of Children First America and the American Education Reform Council, groups that sought to expand school choice options through vouchers and tax credits. She and her husband worked for the successful passage of Michigan's first charter-school bill in 1993 and for the unsuccessful effort in 2000 to amend Michigan's constitution to allow tax-credit scholarships or vouchers. In response to that defeat, DeVos and her husband founded multiple Political Action Committees (PACs) and the Great Lakes Education Project, which championed charter schools, and All Children Matter, a 527 political organization, which she chaired. (It has been reported that All Children Matter owes the State of Ohio a decade-old fine of more than \$5 Million for illegally funneling \$870,000 in contributions from its Virginia political action committee to its affiliate in Ohio, which violated a cap on what Ohio-based PAC's could accept from any single entity.)

Additionally, she formed and currently chairs the American Federation of Children, an advocacy group that assertively pursues expanding charter schools and school voucher programs that use public money to pay for private school tuition. In all, the DeVos family

has donated millions of dollars to Republican candidates at all levels, supported non-profits and other organizations, such as: the Foundation for Excellence in Education, ArtPrize, West Michigan Aviation Academy, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, American Enterprise Institute, and Mars Hill Bible Church, and have long been a partner with the conservative-leaning Heritage Foundation, which named the DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society in the family's honor.

DeVos' background is likely a significant reasoning for Trump's selection. It's worth noting that she and her husband also contributed more than \$9 million to his winning campaign efforts. Throughout his campaign, Trump pledged to enact major school choice reform, touting a \$20 billion choice proposal that is light on details, but would ostensibly support block grants to expand charter and private school options for low-income children using vouchers. Much of the proposal was drafted by DeVos' advocacy group and championed by conservatives. "We know that millions of children, mostly low-income and minority, remain trapped in K-12 schools that are not meeting their needs. We applaud the Trump campaign's focus on school choice and laying out common-sense proposals to help all children access a quality education," DeVos said in September when Trump released his plan. Now, DeVos is prepared to work with the White House and Capitol Hill to implement Trump's pledge for vouchers nationwide.

Additionally, DeVos' selection indicates that federal oversight and regulation regarding school accountability will be less aggressive than in the Obama Administration. Throughout her and her husband's advocacy of charter and school choice laws, the DeVos family has poured millions of dollars into preventing additional regulations on charter schools. For example, when a 1993 school-choice law was under consideration in Michigan, the DeVos family channeled an average of \$25,000 a day into legislators' campaigns to ensure that lawmakers wouldn't enact additional oversight regulations. That effort was a success for DeVos and she has been continuing that fight since, and successfully, as Michigan's charter sector is among the least regulated in the country.

DEVOS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

The record of DeVos' views on higher education issues is minimal to non-existent. At this point, any supposed insights on her views relating to higher education and student aid are almost pure speculation. However, as the Department of Education now manages more than \$1 trillion in student loans and operates a \$100 billion per year consumer lending operation, student aid and student loan issues will undoubtedly play a significant role during any Education Secretary's tenure. Historically, Education Secretaries similarly lacking experience beyond K-12 have relied heavily upon the Deputy Secretary, Under Secretary, and others for counsel on higher education and student aid issues. Absent a reshuffling of positions and portfolios at the Department of Education, which remains a distinct possibility, the higher education community will be extremely focused on appointments for Deputy Secretary, Under Secretary, and Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education for possible insights on the policy direction of a Trump Administration.

REACTION TO DEVOS AS TRUMP PICK

Reaction to Trump's selection has been mixed on Capitol Hill and throughout the education community. Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee stated, "Betsy DeVos is an excellent choice." On the other hand, Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), ranking member of the committee, voiced concerns about DeVos' views on the civil rights component of federal education policy and said she plans to question the nominee at her confirmation hearing on how she "will ensure the safety and respect of all students, of all backgrounds, all across this country." Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) also vowed to intensely question DeVos during her confirmation hearings, saying, "I will have some important questions for her and for the members of our committee who will vote on her nomination. I want to know how Congress would put someone who has spent her life trying to strip funding from public schools in charge of those very schools. I will ask Ms. DeVos if she can lead the effort to build positive school climates when she has spent so much time and money promoting discrimination against people based on their sexual orientation."

More broadly, Jim DeMint, president of the conservative Heritage Foundation, cheered DeVos, stating, "The school choice movement will have a champion in the Education Department." (The Heritage Foundation is being leaned upon heavily by the Trump Transition Team for policy and nominee proposals in many policy areas.) Representative Virginia Foxx (R-NC), who will become chair of the House Education and the Workforce Committee next year, stated, "I am confident she will do a great job and I look forward to working with her."

Education groups have largely stayed quiet as they learn more about the nominee and the Trump Administration's agenda, although some have voiced strong views. Not surprisingly, NEA President Lily Eskelsen Garcia said of DeVos, "She has consistently pushed a corporate agenda to privatize, de-professionalize and impose cookie-cutter solutions to public education. By nominating Betsy DeVos, the Trump administration has demonstrated just how out of touch it is with what works best for students, parents, educators and communities." Additionally, Chad Griffin, president of the Human Rights Campaign, stated, "The DeVos family has a long, well-documented history of funding organizations dedicated to undermining and restricting the rights of LGBTQ people," noting the family's history of donating to Focus on the Family and other groups that have trumpeted anti-LGBTQ views.

One point of contention amongst conservative factions was DeVos' ties to Common Core as a board member of the Foundation for Excellence in Education. However, just moments after being announced as Trump's nominee, DeVos tweeted, "I am not a supporter — period." Overall, congressional Republicans are looking forward to having an ally in an Education Secretary, which they feel they have not experienced the past eight years. During a time where important rules, regulations, and other implementation initiatives are in question, Republicans will be at an advantage with DeVos as secretary, assuming she is ultimately confirmed.

QUESTIONS REMAIN

DeVos has advocated for school choice in Michigan and has written publicly about it stating, “Rather than create a new traditional public school district [in Detroit], we should liberate all students from this woefully under-performing district model and provide in its place a system of schools where performance and competition create high-quality opportunities for kids.... We need reforms that provide better educational opportunities and improve academic outcome for our students....we should expand school choice so students could use state education funds at the public or private school of their choice.” Many advocates would agree with the goal of assuring all children attend a high performing school; however, the unions argue that this devalues and diminishes the capacity of the public school system and civil rights, and disability advocates worry that choice doesn’t apply equally to all students and that the rights of disadvantage students are not protected in such a system.

In addition, from a purely managerial perspective, the education community is hoping that DeVos will staff her leadership team with experienced education policy professionals who know about areas outside of K-12 education. The need to build a strong, talented team, could run counter to President-Elect Trump’s desire to “cut” the Department of Education, provoking some anxiety that a leaner team at the agency could be bad news for career and technical education, adult education, STEM education, higher education, early childhood education and other areas.

CONCLUSION

DeVos faces many challenges in an arena where she doesn’t have much experience. DeVos has neither worked in public education nor advocated much within the public education system. Where she has been able to rely on her personal influence throughout the private sector in the past, DeVos will have to quickly adapt to managing a complicated political environment that isn’t fueled by her own interests, but the interests and priorities of a diverse citizenry. As DeVos has indicated in the past, she understands the importance of reaching across the aisle to compromise and create bipartisan solutions, stating in 2013, “Education should be non-partisan.”