

# Jay P. Greene's Blog

## DeVos and the Education Wars

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President-Elect Trump's nomination of school choice champion Betsy DeVos has become the latest battleground in both the war between pro- and anti-school choice forces as well as the internecine battle between technocratic reformers and market-oriented reformers within the school choice camp. [Jay's take](#) today is a must-read piece. I also added my two cents over at [Cato-at-Liberty](#), defending market-oriented school choice policies from what I see as unfair attacks from the technocrat crowd while simultaneously cautioning my compatriots against pushing for a federal school choice program (e.g., Title I portability). Here's a taste:

At the center of the panic over Trump's nomination of DeVos is their support for school choice. Although [light on details](#), Trump has pledged to devote \$20 billion to a federal voucher program. As is [so often the case](#), the most vocal opponents of federal school choice are right for the wrong reasons. Not only does the federal government lack constitutional jurisdiction (outside of Washington, D.C., military installations, and tribal lands), but a federal voucher program poses a danger to school choice efforts nationwide because a less-friendly future administration could attach regulations that undermine choice policies. Such regulations are always a threat to the effectiveness of school choice policies, but when a particular state adopts harmful regulations, the negative effects are localized. [Louisiana's folly](#) does not affect Florida. Not so with a national voucher program. Moreover, harmful regulations are easier to fight at the state level than at the federal level, where the exercise of "pen and phone" executive authority is increasingly (and unfortunately) the norm.

The technocratic crowd wants to blame the mediocre results in the charter sector in Michigan (DeVos's home state) on its supposedly "unregulated" and "laissez-faire" environment, which raises the question: Do they do know what those terms mean? As I note:

Charter schools in Michigan and Arizona may be subject to fewer government regulations than in other states, but it's absurd to describe the sectors as "laissez-faire" or

“an unregulated free market.” For example, charter school regulations in both states, as elsewhere, limit the ability of charter schools to set their own mission (e.g., they must be secular), mandate that they administer the state standardized test, forbid them from setting their own admissions standards, forbid them from charging tuition, limit who can teach in the schools, limit the growth of the number of schools, and so on.

“Laissez-faire” indeed!

Moreover, as JayBlogger Matt Ladner has frequently pointed out, in the real “Wild West” of Arizona, charter schools are knocking the socks off their district counterparts and showing greater improvement than any state average on the NAEP.

Anyway, while we’re on the topic of Trump and education reform, I’d like to express full-throated agreement with Greg Forster’s two recent posts on bigotry and the choices before us, particularly this:

Trump will be president. All of us who work on policy issues have to live in a world where Trump is president. It’s not necessarily a good idea for every decent person to shun him; that means government will be run by scoundrels like Trump.

Every movement needs its Vaclav Klausés as well as its Vaclav Havels – people who are willing to hold their noses and work for a corrupt regime. You simply can’t get anything done otherwise, because there are no non-corrupt regimes.

Milton went to Chile and advised Pinochet. When challenged, he said: “I gave him good advice.”

But if they forget to hold their noses, if they think the regime is good, the movement dies. And they will forget if no one plays Vaclav Havel and goes to jail for telling the truth about the regime.

My biggest fear is that the school choice issue will become tied to Trump. It can never be said too many times: *Donald Trump is a notorious racist who discriminates against blacks in his businesses, said a judge of Mexican ancestry couldn’t judge him impartially, constantly flirted with the alt-right, and refused, three times, to repudiate the KKK when first asked to do so.* (Just in case this is unclear, the KKK is a criminal organization that murders people and exists to make war on the US government in the name of white nationalism. If Trump wants to learn more about it, he can ask his attorney general, who had a Klan leader executed.)

We in the school choice movement have spent a generation building bridges between the conservatives and libertarians traditionally associated with the issue and progressives and ethnic minority communities. We can't afford to throw all that away.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin once said that he would “fight terrorism as if there is no peace process and pursue peace as if there is no terrorism.” We need a similar approach. We should pursue education reform regardless of the Trump administration's positions on other issues — as Derrell Bradford's [moving personal account](#) reminds us, the stakes are just too high not to. That will entail, at times, working with anyone at the Trump administration who is willing to listen, and supporting good and decent people who go to work for the administration. However, it also means calling out Trump and/or his administration when they do wrong (like, say, [Tweet that people should go to jail for engaging in constitutionally protected speech](#), to take just one example from the last 24 hours), no matter what progress they have made on education reform.

Navigating the political waters over the next four years will be difficult. Even Odysseus only had to pass between Scylla and Charybdis once. I suspect education reformers will find themselves in the straits on numerous occasions in these coming days. I pray that we will have the wisdom to know and the fortitude to do the right thing.

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