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Unions Attack Betsy DeVos To Sideline The Research That Supports Her Ideas

Her opponents fight the person, but Betsy DeVos's platform is sound education reform.

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Although Betsy DeVos squeaked by in a 12-11 committee vote Tuesday, her ultimate Senate confirmation will be a bitter battle as school choice opponents stampede.

To defend DeVos's vision for letting parents direct their kids' education dollars to schools of the family's choice, it is important to examine how research says alternative school systems affect both surrounding public schools and individual students.

Our Schooling System Needs Improvements

The U.S. public school system costs the country more than \$600 billion annually, yet those funds are not equating to student success. While the United States has nearly tripled inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending over the past 40 years, "test scores have remained flat and internationally unimpressive," writes Jason Bedrick, an education policy analyst at the Cato Institute.

A new report from the Pew Research Center found that American students continue to fall behind their international peers in math and science. According to the Program for International Student Assessment, the U.S. ranked 35th in math and 27th in science out of 64 developed countries. Nearly half of all polled members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science said U.S. students are below average in K-12 science and math subjects.

This is not only a problem for academic advancement. Low math and science achievement has created major hiring gaps in the marketplace for U.S. workers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics has determined that almost half of the 30 occupations set to expand most quickly in the next ten years will require a college degree. Yet, according to the McKinsey's Global Institute, nearly 2 million workplace positions will remain unfilled by U.S. employees for their lack of analytical and tech skills.

Betsy DeVos Is Right: School Choice Works

Evidence-based research has found that at the local level, access to school choice programs such as vouchers or tax-credit scholarships, in which individuals and businesses get tax deductions for funding private K-12 scholarships, increases graduation rates and therefore, employment, while saving taxpayer money.

“School choice programs consistently produce similar or better results for much less money,” Bedrick writes. “...a 2009 review of the global research literature, the Cato Institute’s Andrew Coulson found that every study to measure efficiency in education returned a statistically significant positive result for markets.”

In studying South Carolina counties, Sven R. Larson found self-employment increased up to 25 percent more in areas with school choice programs. School choice also reduced the rate of high school dropouts and the associated costs and problems.

Creative models adapted to local communities are far more achievable within the flexible structures of charter and private schools, and they best serve the underserved. DePaul Cristo Rey High School in Cincinnati, Ohio was just awarded the Governor’s School Innovation Award for three years of 100 percent college acceptance by graduates. The Catholic school network, which has 32 schools nationwide, serves more than 10,000 at-risk students and is almost entirely funded through its work-study program, which is built upon strong community partnerships.

The Knowledge Is Power Program charter school network has 200 schools nationwide. Its students outperform the national average for academic growth across all grades and subjects each year, and most are eligible for free-and-reduced priced lunch, which are proxies for poverty.

In his June 2016 study, “Competition: For the Children,” Chuck DeVore found that increasing parent choice in Texas schools helped lift test scores. A full choice program in the state of Texas would accelerate math scores to eventually reach student achievement levels similar to those found in Korea and Japan, which are among the highest in the world. Other studies have found that even slightly improving American kids’ math knowledge would produce trillions in national economic expansion.

Choice Allows for Needed Updates to Public Schooling

DeVos was slammed during her Senate hearing for not discussing details of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the federal law driving mandates about special-needs students. The public school system is a haven for many special-needs students due to the expense and complexity of necessary therapies and should be thoroughly understood by any education decisionmaker, especially at the federal level. But public schools cannot be the only option, especially as the number of students diagnosed with disabilities increases exponentially across the country.

Education savings accounts have gained ground across the nation in recent years and look to pass into law in several more states this year. Dynamic, customizable, and a savings to public school districts, ESAs place a percentage of a student’s public school funds into parents’ hands to design an education that best suits their child. Parents can use it to buy not just private tuition, but pay for educational therapy, individual classes, and education materials such as textbooks.

This option already benefits the most challenging students in several states while alleviating an already overburdened public school system.

Charter schools, private education, and other options may prove a bulwark against a looming tide of change as student needs outstrip the abilities of public schools and public school funding. Widespread teacher shortages are slowly being superseded by changes in licensing laws, but not fast enough, and non-traditional schools don't have to wait on new legislation. Prioritizing a traditional platform over student needs seems shortsighted.

Millennials say they would choose a private education for their child if given the choice. Although they often still counterintuitively rail against leadership that supports private and alternative schooling, they may just get their wish with DeVos' appointment.