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Mitt Romney: Trump has made a smart choice for education secretary

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Mitt Romney, a Republican, was governor of Massachusetts from 2003 to 2007. In 2012, he was the Republican nominee for president.

The nomination of Betsy DeVos for secretary of education has reignited the age-old battle over education policy. The heat is already intense not just because it involves the future of our children but also because a lot of money is at stake. Essentially, it's a debate between those in the education establishment who support the status quo because they have a financial stake in the system and those who seek to challenge the status quo because it's not serving kids well.

Both sides will take their case to the public hoping to sway senators who will vote on confirmation. Here's my take.

First, it's important to have someone who isn't financially biased shaping education. As a highly successful businesswoman, DeVos doesn't need the job now, nor will she be looking for an education job later. Her key qualification is that she cares deeply about our children and will do everything in her power to offer them a brighter future. She founded two of the nation's leading education reform organizations and helped open the door to charter schools in her home state of Michigan. I have known her for many years; she is smart, dynamic, no nonsense and committed. That's why the education establishment is so animated to stop her.

Second, it's important to have someone who will challenge the conventional wisdom and the status quo. In 1970, it cost \$56,903 to educate a child from K-12. By 2010, adjusting for inflation, we had raised that spending to \$164,426 — almost three times as much. Further, the number of people employed in our schools had nearly doubled. But despite the enormous investment, the performance of our kids has shown virtually no improvement. The establishment predictably calls for more spending and smaller classrooms — in other words, more teachers and more pay. But more of the same is demonstrably not the answer.

The interests opposing DeVos's nomination charge that charter schools in Michigan — and particularly in Detroit — haven't lived up to their promise. But recent studies show that choice and competition are having a positive impact on kids' learning in the state. A recent analysis by the Michigan Association of Public School Academies found that students in Detroit charters are performing better than their counterparts in traditional public schools in every subject tested by the state's annual assessment. Meanwhile, recent studies by Stanford University found children in Detroit charters showing stronger academic improvement, gaining an extra two

months' learning in math and reading per year, as compared with the typical public school student in the city.

DeVos's detractors have also accused her of opposing oversight and accountability for her state's charter sector, leading to poor results. This is another misleading charge. What she opposed was a new government bureaucracy intended to stifle choice and limit competition in Detroit education. In fact, the organization she chairs did endorse an A-to-F letter grading system to hold schools accountable statewide. It has also been pointed out that while more than 100 Michigan charters have been shut down for various reasons over the past 20 years, not one traditional public school has been shuttered because of poor performance.

When I became governor of my state, I wanted to improve our schools. The establishment told me that to do so, I should reduce classroom size and increase funding. Frankly, that comported with my preconceptions. But then I looked at the data. We compared the average classroom size and spending in each of our 300-plus school districts with the academic performance of their students. To my surprise, there was no relationship whatsoever. Smaller-classroom-size districts and bigger-spending districts had no better student outcomes. In fact, the district with the smallest average classroom size and the most spending per student was in the bottom 10th of student achievement on our state tests.

Massachusetts has consistently ranked No. 1 among all 50 states on the federal National Assessment of Educational Progress exams. I believe that there are many reasons for this success. Among them are a statewide curriculum developed by our own educators; a state exam in math, science and English required to graduate from high school; extensive school choice among standard public schools, charter schools, public exam schools, private schools, Catholic schools and cyber schools; superb teachers; and involved parents. Massachusetts has also benefited from creative political leadership on both sides of the aisle and from remarkable flexibility by our education unions.

The answers for improving our nation's schools will come from people who have no financial stake in the outcome and study the most successful education systems here and around the world. McKinsey & Co. has carried out just such an analysis. It concluded that spending and classroom size weren't what determined the success of a school system. Instead, factors such as the qualities and educational attainment of the teachers were most important. No surprise there: It's the teachers that make the difference.

I am truly excited that someone of Betsy DeVos's capability, dedication and absence of financial bias is willing to take an honest and open look at our schools. The decades of applying the same old bromides must come to an end. The education establishment and its defenders will understandably squeal, but the interests of our children must finally prevail.