



Endangered public schools need federal leadership more than ever

Instead of offering solutions, Education Secretary DeVos pushes a political agenda

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NEW YORK — Education and politics are often closely entangled, but in the midst of a pandemic that has claimed more than 200,000 U.S. lives, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has taken politicization to a new level.

With coronavirus cases soaring and schools facing teacher and technology shortages, DeVos has spent the last few months urging public schools to open, under threat of losing federal money, while at the same time calling for immediate relief for private schools.

It's not that parents don't want options. Living room learning gets old quickly, and not all families have internet access and adequate technology. But there's a big problem with the secretary of education using the pandemic as a way to push her favored policy positions in a deeply partisan way, during a grueling time for the nation's 51 million public schoolchildren.

The lack of a promised federal aid package, combined with teacher shortages, is making it difficult for cash-strapped systems that rely for funding on bereft state and local governments to help students catch up, either in person or virtually.

DeVos serves a president who has publicly belittled and challenged science, so the absence of federal guidance for public school reopenings is hardly surprising. Still, the big federal push to reopen buildings and pretend all is normal came without clear recommendations and money that schools – whether public, charter or private – desperately need.

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And even schools of choice like the KIPP charter network are asking the federal government to step up and push additional funding for all schools. Nina Rees, president of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, has also asked for more federal funds, to close the digital divide and help low-income students most seriously affected by school closings. This week, a group of civil and human rights activists called for targeted education funding as well, for both safe reopenings and to ensure that all students benefit equally.

Supporters of school choice say DeVos is smartly using her position to push for long needed alternatives to public schools as we've known them. Corey DeAngelis and Neal McCluskey of the Cato Institute, the libertarian research institution, recently described how the coronavirus has

“starkly demonstrated the need for American education to be much more agile and adaptable to changing and unique circumstances.”

DeVos has likewise argued that the pandemic has demonstrated the urgency of school choice.

“Parents are increasingly demanding it,” she said in [a recent interview](#) with the Associated Press. “It’s becoming ever more evident that parents and students need to have more choices. I would argue that it is the ideal time to be talking about this more widely.”

In the midst of a national crisis, though, nearly every choice is fraught. Some parochial, private and charter schools have been able to open even as neighboring public schools remain shuttered, but those schools serve only a fraction of the nation’s schoolchildren. Learning pods, micro-schools, tutors and homeschooling are also flourishing, but are less available to lower- and middle-income families.

A recent [survey](#) by the nonprofit group [EdChoice](#) found that a majority of Americans favor choices, such as education savings accounts (78 percent), tax-credit scholarships (69 percent), vouchers (65 percent) and charter schools (64 percent), when provided a brief description of each.

But those proposals don’t address what’s happening right now: for many families, their *only* choice is the local public school. They can’t pay a tutor or take over their children’s learning. And their kids are in desperate need of additional support if they are to simply stay on track academically.

And many children have fallen further behind since schools shut down and turned to remote learning last March. [In an April survey of 5,659 educators](#) around the country, 34 percent said that no more than one in four students were attending their remote classes.

A majority said less than half had shown up. In many school districts this fall, [one in 10 kindergarten students](#) didn’t show up for online learning.

Teachers unions, a favorite target of DeVos, have argued against in-person reopenings, pleading for help in making schools safer first. “Donald Trump’s disregard for science has already cost 200,000 American lives during this pandemic,” National Education Association President [Becky Pringle said in a statement](#) this month. “How many students and educators will we lose to COVID-19 before this administration prioritizes science over partisan politics?”

Where, in the big push to reopen and pretend that all is normal, are the recommendations and money that public school students, teachers and parents need for safe reopenings?

The cost of putting safety measures in place for an average school district with just 3,659 students, however, would amount to [\\$1,778,139](#), according to a recent analysis from the Association of School Business Officials International and the School Superintendents Association. That’s a daunting price tag no one wants to pay.

Most recently, comments DeVos [made in a Fox News interview](#) about the Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and his “shameful” support of teachers unions landed her in some trouble after a link to the video was posted on the Education Department’s YouTube page, and also appeared in an email from the department.

DeVos was criticized for violating the Hatch Act, which bars federal employees from using their government office to engage in political campaigning.

Now the Office of Special Counsel has opened an investigation into the matter, but little is expected to come of it. A dozen senior administration officials have violated the act, according to the special counsel's office. In most cases, the officials received only a warning letter.

When I called the Department of Education to ask for DeVos' response to the investigation, I was sent the following statement from her press secretary, Angela Morabito.

"The Secretary was asked to respond to oft-repeated criticism of her and her policies, and she defended her policies," Morabito's statement said. "The Hatch Act does not prohibit that kind of exchange with a journalist. Case closed."

Others point out that the school reopening debacle shouldn't fall on DeVos' shoulders alone.

Rick Hess, director of policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, is no fan of Trump, but told me local school systems deserve some of the blame for reopening problems.

"Betsy DeVos is generally skeptical of public schools, and people can agree or disagree, but I think a reasonable person could look at how schools have responded and come away unimpressed," Hess said.

In many districts, that's sadly true. But the problem with DeVos' approach is that while she professes to support educational choices for families, she's undermining options available to the vast majority of schoolchildren. Her actions and comments stack the deck in favor of her own favored policy prescriptions, just when public schools, the only choice many parents have, need all the help they can get.

That's why it's long past time to put politics aside.