

# INSIDE HIGHER ED

## Trump's Choice for Education Secretary

*Betsy DeVos has led Michigan GOP and organizations pushing for school choice, but her views on higher education are largely unknown.*

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President-elect Donald Trump's pick of the Michigan school choice activist Betsy DeVos as his education secretary drew praise from many conservatives and criticism from liberal groups and teachers' unions, who said the selection signaled intentions to privatize education.

DeVos, who served as chair of the Michigan Republican party from 1996-2000, has a track record of promoting charter schools and school vouchers. It's expected that she will bring a focus on those issues to the federal Department of Education. Less clear is what that vision says about her potential priorities for the higher education sector.

The DeVos family has a history of supporting higher education institutions in Michigan through charitable contributions.

Peter McPherson, president of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, served as president of Michigan State University from 1993 to 2004 and is familiar with the DeVos family. He said DeVos has been interested in making sure low-income students have an opportunity for good education and positive outcomes.

"My assumption is that those themes of interest in opportunity and accountability would be a major interest of hers in higher education," McPherson said.

What that will mean specifically for the approach DeVos takes to issues such as accountability and regulation in higher education as well as access to financial aid and the role of for-profit colleges was unclear, McPherson said. But he said DeVos has been dedicated in pursuing the causes she has supported.

"She's a dynamo," he said. "She's a real worker. She's a formidable person."

If confirmed by the Senate, DeVos would not be the first education secretary without a substantial background in higher education. Arne Duncan, before serving in the Obama administration, was the CEO of Chicago Public Schools, and he went on to spend considerable

energy on higher education issues. (The Associated Press reported Saturday that Jerry Falwell Jr., the president of Liberty University, said he had been offered the job of education secretary but turned it down.)

DeVos's father-in-law, Richard DeVos, is the founder of multilevel-marketing company Amway and the owner of the Orlando Magic of the National Basketball Association. And the DeVos Foundation has made a number of contributions to conservative think tanks as well as the free-speech group Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

The DeVos family has a deep history of knowledge and involvement in higher education, McPherson said. Richard DeVos also played a key role in establishing Michigan State University's medical campus in Grand Rapids, Mich. Betsy DeVos and her husband, Dick, have a foundation that has contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to Michigan colleges and universities, public and private.

But the family is best known for support of the charter school movement and expanded access to school vouchers. Betsy DeVos more recently chaired the American Federation for Children -- a coalition of private school choice organizations that advocates for school choice items, including vouchers. Trump has himself proposed a \$20 billion national school voucher program, and his campaign in August added Rob Goad, a policy adviser to Indiana Representative Luke Messer, to craft school choice policies for the campaign.

After a primary campaign that heavily featured a debate about the costs of college, Democrats under Hillary Clinton were expected to prioritize higher education. After Trump's surprising win in the presidential election, the DeVos announcement signals the spotlight will shift to issues long favored by Republicans, such as school choice.

### Reactions to Selection

The DeVos pick was applauded by many conservatives who favor expanded school choice in the K-12 education sphere. But they also acknowledged having little clue what she would do on higher ed.

Neal McCluskey, a director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, wrote that he has "no idea where DeVos stands on early childhood or higher education issues, and the latter, especially, is gigantic, with Washington furnishing tens of billions of dollars in student loans, among other higher-ed matters. DeVos will essentially be taking over a hugely bureaucratic lending company -- lots of regulatory power -- that on a day-to-day basis could prove to be a far greater burden than she expected."

But McCluskey said DeVos could immediately rescind the Dear Colleague letters from the Department of Education that have pushed colleges to pursue greater enforcement of Title IX efforts, especially on sexual assault. That's a priority for conservatives who say the legal rights of the accused have been curtailed on campus, but worrying for advocates of sexual assault victims.

Tennessee Republican Lamar Alexander, chairman of the Senate education committee, called DeVos an excellent choice and said his committee would move "swiftly" to consider her nomination in January.

"Betsy has worked for years to improve educational opportunities for all children," Alexander said. "As secretary, she will be able to implement the new law fixing No Child Left Behind just as Congress wrote it, reversing the trend to a national school board and restoring to states, governors, school boards, teachers and parents greater responsibility for improving education in their local communities."

He said he also looked forward to working with DeVos on a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, which he called an opportunity to clear out a "jungle of red tape" in the sector.

But Senator Patty Murray of Washington, the senior Democrat on the education committee, said she would closely scrutinize DeVos's record.

"President-elect Trump has made a number of troubling statements over the course of his campaign on a range of issues that a future secretary of education will be charged with implementing and enforcing -- from education policy, to civil rights and equality of opportunity, to his personal views on sexual assault and harassment, and more," Murray said in a statement. "Right now students, parents, teachers and school leaders across the country are demanding to know how his secretary of education will ensure the safety and respect of all students, of all backgrounds, all across this country -- and I will be focused throughout this process on how his nominee intends to do just that."

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten called DeVos the "most ideological, anti-public education nominee" for education secretary since President Jimmy Carter established a cabinet-level Department of Education.

"In nominating DeVos, Trump makes it loud and clear that his education policy will focus on privatizing, defunding and destroying public education in America," Weingarten said in a statement.

Critics of the pick were quick to point out that neither DeVos nor her children attended public schools.

Democrats for Education Reform, a pro-charter school organization, praised DeVos's dedication to expanding access to quality charter schools. But the group called on her to oppose the most divisive Trump proposals, including mass deportations of undocumented immigrants, as well offensive and bigoted rhetoric.

"We hope that Mrs. DeVos will be a voice that opposes policies that would harm our children, both in the schoolhouse and the families and communities in which our children live," said Shavar Jeffries, president of the group.