



Education Secretary Betsy DeVos on School Choice, Vouchers and Religion

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Vice President Mike Pence on Tuesday broke a 50-50 Senate tie to officially confirm Betsy DeVos as the next secretary of Education.

The vote came Tuesday after a 24-hour “talk-a-thon” protest from Democrats, as senators took turns arguing against Trump’s nominee throughout the night and into the morning. With the defection of Republican Senators Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Susan Collins of Maine, in an historic move, Vice President Mike Pence was the tie-breaking vote in favor of DeVos.

While the Trump administration hasn’t spoken much about the direction it intends to take the nation’s educational system, here are three things to know about the next Education Secretary.

School choice

DeVos is a firm believer that a child should not be limited to a school district based on their family’s income or zip code, a view in line with comments from the President. She has advocated for a controversial school voucher program in the past, which allocates federal taxpayer dollars to provide children the opportunity to attend private and religious institutions.

“Let the education dollars follow each child, instead of forcing the child to follow the dollars. This is pretty straightforward. And it’s how you go from a closed system to an open system that encourages innovation. People deserve choices and options,” DeVos said during a speech in March of 2015.

Critics view DeVos’ position on vouchers as a threat to the nation’s public school system.

“[The school vouchers] are deeply problematic. Public schools are already underfunded and [the vouchers] would lead to the dismantling of public schools. The research also shows that they

don't lead to higher outcomes for kids," Catherine Brown, vice president of education policy at the Center for American Progress, told FOX Business.

However, Dr. Grover J. Whitehurst, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a former Education Department official under President George W. Bush, said the Trump administration hasn't established that it would in fact institute a voucher program and may opt for another system to promote school choice.

"What the Trump administration might do is to propose education savings accounts for families. They could use these to attend regular public school, private school or charter school. This type of program ... has passed legal muster in many states. I think we might see that as Trump administration's way of providing parental support," he said.

Future of charter schools

A big part of DeVos' campaign to promote school choice is expanding the charter school sector. Demand for charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately managed, has been on the rise in recent years, according to Dr Whitehurst.

"There are quite a few states that have caps on new charter schools, in spite of the fact that there is considerable unmet demand which we see by waiting lists for existing charter schools," he said. "Should the federal government incentivize states to eliminate the caps that would, in general, be a good thing. As long as it's the state's choice to accept or deny whatever the incentives are, then why not?"

While Brown agreed that "high quality" charter schools can be impactful for kids, she said on average they are no more beneficial than traditional public schools.

Nina Rees, president and CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools which has endorsed DeVos, wants to see an increase in funding for federal charter schools to \$1 billion by 2020, more investment in R&D, and assurances that new funding does not come at the expense of "existing funding for Title I and IDEA" at public schools.

Still, there are concerns that an effort on behalf of the government to expand charter schools would be bad news for states and localities.

"With federal money comes federal rules, and the point of charter schooling is to have innovative institutions unfettered by red tape and instead held accountable by parents choosing them. The last thing we want is not just more red tape, but tape from a single dispenser: the federal government," Neal McCluskey, director of The Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, told FOX Business.

Religion

DeVos' devout Christian beliefs have been another lightning rod for criticism, as some argue that is what fuels her school choice position, since standard curricula don't always offer religious options.

“I think the record shows that part of her commitment to vouchers is her strong religious beliefs. She has a desire to funnel money away from public schools...which in my opinion raises some First Amendment concerns,” Brown said.

But some argue that is an overreach.

“Obviously being a believer and a religious person is not a bar to public office. There’s no reason she’s a problem for public schools based on the fact that she’s religious,” said Dr. Whitehurst.

Furthermore, her faith should not be an issue in the debate, says McCluskey.

“Those who fear DeVos might be religiously motivated should take heart: a major virtue of choice is that it lets everyone pursue the schooling they want for their children without having to impose it on others,” he said.