



Somewhat Reasonable Thoughts on Life and Liberty from The Heartland Institute

Local control should precede choice on DeVos' agenda

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Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos survived a Senate confirmation process made bitter partly because of the well-organized opposition of the teachers unions, which fear that she can parlay her successful advocacy of school choice as a private citizen and philanthropist into much bigger gains for monopoly-busting choice in her powerful new position.

Grandstanding Senate Democrats went all-out to stop the confirmation, using an overnight meeting on the Senate floor as a megaphone for their union benefactors.

That doesn't fully explain, however, the magnitude of the opposition that resulted in this cabinet nomination becoming the first ever to require the tie-breaking vote cast by the vice president sitting as presiding officer of the Senate.

As incongruous as it may seem, given DeVos' championing of a parent's right to select the best possible school for a child, parents organized in grassroots groups in all 50 states were among the most adamant critics of President Donald Trump's nominee to lead federal education policy.

On social media, these groups have names such as Stop Common Core in Florida (or New Jersey, or Oregon, or Michigan, or insert your own state). Their reach is enormous. The concern for many of these activists boils down to this: While choice may be desirable, it is not feasible when big government imposes uniform requirements on all schools for such central policies as curricula, testing, and teacher evaluation.

A choice between two schools forced to serve up the same fare is akin to a choice between a Big Mac and a Whopper. They see DeVos' longstanding support of powerful organizations that pushed Common Core standards on schools nationwide as rendering null and void any "choice" that might emanate from Washington, DC under her leadership.

With regard to choice vs. control, the Cato Institute's Neal McCluskey astutely observed in a Jan. 31 post, "choice needs freedom from stultifying rules and regulations to be meaningful. Specialization, competition, innovation—none can meaningfully exist without educators having the freedom to engage in new and different ways of delivering education."

Throughout the election campaign, Trump vowed at practically every rally to end the Common Core nationalized standards and restore local control of K–12 education.

In the final stages of the campaign, he also pledged to redirect \$20 billion of federal spending toward helping bring school choice to disadvantaged children stuck in failing schools. The details as to what federal controls would apply to participating charter or private voucher-aided schools are still unknown.

As her first order of business, DeVos could best serve the cause of expanded school choice by first clearing away the suffocating controls the U.S. Education Department (USED) continues to exert on local schools. She would greatly improve her standing with grassroots groups by living up to her post-nomination renunciation of Common Core and using her regulatory authority to free states and localities from federal control over standards, assessments, data-mining, career-tracking, and psychological profiling of students.

Contrary to boasting by the congressional Republican leadership, the Every Student Succeeds Act, which became effective last year, kept the ultimate decision-making power with USED instead of returning it to the local level.

Given that personnel is policy, DeVos ought to include on her staff experienced scholars who understand the federal government has no constitutional authority to dictate education policy and that USED ought to be phased out of existence. Another source of concern to grassroots parents' groups are reports DeVos instead plans to offer top posts to luminaries such as Indiana businessman Allan Hubbard and New Mexico Education Secretary Hanna Skandera. Both have been backers of the Common Core agenda.

In his first month on the job, Trump has shown he wants to go big in delivering on his campaign promises.

However, a push for federal school vouchers in the current regulatory climate could backfire big-time either by flopping in Congress or, if enacted, drawing more private and religiously affiliated schools into the freedom-killing Common Core web.

Having a dedicated school choice activist as U.S. education secretary does not alter the reality choices are properly made in communities and homes, not in Washington, DC.