



Evangelical Christians will shape Trump's education agenda

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Evangelicals played a large role in getting President Donald Trump to the White House, and now they will shape Trump's education agenda.

Betsy DeVos, Trump's beleaguered pick for education secretary, supports taxpayer funding for religious schools and once called education reform a way to "advance God's kingdom."

Mike Pence, a leader in the evangelical community, will likely break a tie in the Senate to ensure DeVos' nomination.

And Jerry Falwell Jr., the president of one the largest evangelical colleges in the nation, Liberty University, will lead an education reform task force focusing on higher education.

"They weren't even at the table under President (Barack) Obama," said North Carolina Republican Rep. Robert Pittenger, who is connected to the evangelical community. "I think it's prudent ... that those who have a world view of the Bible be able to have a conversation."

In education circles, a major part of that conversation is an ongoing policy debate on the role of vouchers and taxpayer funding for religious schools. Liberal Democrats have vocally opposed DeVos' nomination and turned it into a referendum on allowing tax dollars to be spent on scholarships for students to attend religiously affiliated schools.

"I don't think that religion defines a person, but what we see is a real clear agenda that Trump began," said Mary Kusler, who is overseeing the National Education Association's effort to oppose DeVos' nomination. "We believe that the public school system has largely been a cornerstone of democracy."

The opposition to DeVos' nomination is unprecedented, as a sitting vice president has never been required to break a tie over a Cabinet nomination.

Senate Republican leaders are expected to bring DeVos' nomination to the floor early next week, and if Pence breaks the tie the vocal advocacy efforts against her confirmation will fall one vote short.

"There is a lot of overlap for school choice and religious freedom," said Neal McClusky, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, a libertarian-leaning think tank in Washington. "Her nomination is a proxy on private school choice."

McClusky added that DeVos had three things working against her during the confirmation process: a lack of conviction in some of her answers, a lack of personal experience in the public education system and her wealthy background. He said the furor around DeVos' nomination will die down once she is confirmed.

"In six months to a year, no one will remember her confirmation," McClusky predicted.

But DeVos' likely appointment combined with Falwell, who will focus on higher education issues and wants to stop universities from independently investigating sexual assault cases on campus, could be a boon for religious conservatives.

"There is a genuine belief and great evidence to back it up that higher education in this country tends to diss a Christian worldview," said the Rev. Mark Harris, a North Carolina pastor who twice ran for Congress. "I think we're going through a shift in the country, a sense that a Christian world view deserves a seat at the table and in the marketplace of ideas."

Harris pointed to the recent protests at the University of California, Berkeley, where windows were broken and fires started by protesters who opposed a right-wing speaker scheduled to make an appearance on campus, as evidence of hypocrisy on the left. Trump threatened to withdraw federal funds from the university after the protest.

"The word 'tolerance' is used all the time to talk about evangelicals," Harris said, arguing that the protests are examples of intolerant liberals.

Harris invoked efforts in North Carolina like the Opportunity Scholarship, which provides up to \$4,200 a year for a child to attend a private school, as ways that DeVos can promote education and force public schools to compete with charter and private schools.

But Kusler argued that opposition to DeVos, even if it fails to sink her nomination, will render her ineffective as education secretary.

"I think our activism has already made a difference," Kusler said. "If she is confirmed next week she will be the first Cabinet secretary who has had to engage the vice president of our country to break a tie. That's the antithesis of a mandate coming into office. We firmly believe all of this calls into question the agenda she will try to implement."

Conservatives are hopeful that despite the vocal opposition, the Trump administration will support school vouchers and listen to the concerns of evangelicals before making education decisions.

“There is now a seat at the marketplace of ideas for evangelicals and people with a biblical worldview,” Harris said. “That’s how we’ve got to begin to look at people on both sides of the aisle and not jump to conclusions.”