

The Washington Post

In education, greater choice doesn't always mean better outcomes

Jeffrey J. Selingo

November 30, 2016

President-elect Donald Trump stands with Betsy DeVos after a meeting at Trump National Golf Club Bedminster in Bedminster Township, N.J. on Saturday, Nov. 19, 2016. (Photo by Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

President-elect Donald Trump nominated Betsy DeVos, a Republican billionaire from Michigan, to be secretary of education last week. The choice of someone well known for her views on K-12 education sent college officials scrambling just before the long Thanksgiving weekend to find anything DeVos might have said about higher education.

They didn't have much success. As Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, wrote in his analysis of the pick: "I have no idea where DeVos stands on early-childhood or higher education issues, and the latter, especially, is gigantic."

But DeVos' career spent promoting school choice so families can use taxpayer dollars to pay for private and religious K-12 schools provides clues to her thinking about the \$80 billion Washington investment in higher education and the federal role in education overall.

In her home state of Michigan, DeVos has closely followed an ideology that promotes the idea that school choice — either through market-based vouchers or privately run charter schools — improves outcomes and forces poor-performing schools to either get better or close. As Kevin Carey, director of the education policy program at the New America Foundation noted after DeVos' nomination, she has lobbied on all fronts in the school-choice movement, and she has been a particularly strong advocate for privatizing public education as much as possible.

If DeVos arrives at the Education Department intent on pursuing that agenda at a national level, she might have second thoughts after she learns more about the American system of higher education. In some ways, U.S. colleges and universities follow the market-based approach DeVos imagines for the structure of K-12 schools. Students are free to apply to any college or university, and most schools accept the vast majority who apply. Federal aid, in the form of grants and loans, follows the student.

But the availability of federal dollars for choice in higher education — one that has led 20 percent of students to enroll in private colleges — hasn't necessarily led to better outcomes. Only slightly more than 50 percent of American students who enter college leave with a bachelor's

degree. The reasons why are varied, but two in particular provide lessons for choice advocates at the K-12 level.

For one, students and families still lack good comparable consumer-friendly information about outcomes among colleges they are considering. Whether students stay in college, graduate, get a job, and how much they earn after graduation, differs widely between colleges and even within schools based on a student's major. In recent years, thanks in large part to efforts by the Obama administration and several foundations, families have been given more access to outcome data by school and major, mostly about salaries after graduation. In turn, that data has formed the basis of several new rankings put out by Money magazine, the Economist, and others.

Even so, the presence of more information in the hands of consumers sometimes confuses them rather than helps them make better choices. Research has shown that smart students from low-income backgrounds, for example, frequently “undermatch” when enrolling in college — meaning they don't go to the best college they can get into and end up dropping out of a less-selective school with fewer resources to help them succeed.

In theory, choice in higher education means being able to apply to any one of a several thousand colleges across the country. But in reality, most students go to college near their home, and as a result, their choices are limited. Freshmen who enroll in public four-year colleges typically attend an institution that is less than 100 miles from home; for those attending private four-year colleges, the distance is about 250 miles.

In K-12, student choices are even more limited. As Carey noted in his analysis of the DeVos nomination, outside of urban areas, families have few, if any, options for charter or private schools. “A significant number of Trump's most ardent supporters live in sparsely populated areas where school choice is logistically unlikely,” Carey wrote.

The second reason choice hasn't necessarily led to better outcomes in higher education is the absence of a strong gatekeeper for quality control. Right now, higher education is policed by a national network of regional accreditors approved by the U.S. Department of Education. Without accreditation, a college can't access federal financial aid for its students. But accreditors are run and financed by the colleges themselves. It's kind of like the fox guarding the hen house. Colleges determine quality measures they need to ultimately meet.

In recent years, such self-regulation has come under increased scrutiny as questions have been raised about colleges that continue to operate with low graduation rates or that produce graduates deep in debt and without any job prospects. In June, an advisory board within the Education Department voted to strip one of the largest accreditors in the country of federal recognition because of its lax oversight.

Accreditation works in similar ways in K-12, and primary and secondary schools also have more oversight than higher education at the local and state level. Still, public and charter schools with poor academic results and low graduation rates continue to operate.

As DeVos will soon find out, even decades of choice in higher education hasn't led to better outcomes for students. Hopefully, what DeVos sees has happened with U.S. colleges and

universities will provide a much-needed lesson for her as she tries to apply her market-based approach to education on a national level.