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Tyler Morning Telegraph

Education secretary will reduce federal role in local schools

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There's quite a bit of hyperventilating in the education establishment over Donald Trump's pick for Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos. And frankly, some folks should be worried – but not about vouchers.

DeVos' real goal should be reducing the power and influence of the federal government in public education, which is a state matter.

Randi Weingarten, head of the American Federation of Teachers, tweeted last week, “Trump has chosen the most ideological, anti-public ed nominee since the creation of the Dept of Education.”

And at Slate magazine, Dana Goldstein worries that Trump's nominee will “gut public education.”

“The school choice movement that Trump has embraced is bipartisan; centrist Democrats and Republicans both tend to support public charter schools,” she writes. “But DeVos, a former chairwoman of the Michigan Republican Party, represents the most conservative corner of the movement. She and her husband have funded a series of efforts to turn public school funding into vouchers for students to attend private schools. They have also fought to prevent charter schools, including for-profit charter schools, from being more tightly regulated.”

But here's the thing. All of those efforts have taken place at the state level. There's no plan, or precedent, or even intent to institute any kind of a vouchers program at the federal level. Even Trump's vague campaign promise on school choice was about working through the states to encourage various programs.

But vouchers aren't the real threat to the education establishment here. The real threat – and something unions such as Weingarten's AFT should take seriously – is a reduced federal role in education.

“As is so often the case, the most vocal opponents of federal school choice are right for the wrong reasons,” writes Jason Bedrick for the Cato Institute. “Not only does the federal government lack constitutional jurisdiction (outside of Washington, D.C., military installations, and tribal lands), but a federal voucher program poses a danger to school choice efforts

nationwide because a less-friendly future administration could attach regulations that undermine choice policies.”

That has always been the strongest argument against vouchers – no money from the government ever comes without strings, and it wouldn’t be long before federal bureaucrats started demanding to have a say in what is being taught, and how.

“Such regulations are always a threat to the effectiveness of school choice policies, but when a particular state adopts harmful regulations, the negative effects are localized,” Bedrick writes. “Louisiana’s folly does not affect Florida. Not so with a national voucher program. Moreover, harmful regulations are easier to fight at the state level than at the federal level, where the exercise of ‘pen and phone’ executive authority is increasingly (and unfortunately) the norm.”

That’s why DeVos is much more likely to push for a less robust Department of Education, one which plays a smaller role in education. That’s because education is a state matter.

Even the Department recognizes this, as it states on its website: “Education is primarily a State and local responsibility in the United States.”

And that’s just how it should be.