What Betsy DeVos Means for the Future of Public Education

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Elizabeth “Betsy” DeVos is the current Secretary of Education for the United States of America. DeVos is known for her allegiance to the Republican Party and her preference for charter schools and voucher programs. According to her website, she served as a Republican National Committeewoman in Michigan between 1992 and 1997, as well as being elected to serve as chairwoman of Michigan’s Republican Party between 1996 and 2000, and then again from 2003 through 2007 (Betsy Devos: Leadership, 2016, n.p.). She has served on the board of the Alliance for School Choice, the Foundation for Excellence in Education, and the Great Lakes Education Project. Her appointment by President Donald Trump has been met with more backlash than support.

In early February 2017, Betsy DeVos was appointed Secretary of Education when Vice President Mike Pence cast an affirmative tie-breaking vote in the Senate. The vote was the closest for any of President Trump’s nominees and the first time any Presidential administration has had to resort to such efforts to confirm a nominee (Graves, 2017, n.p.). Though the Secretary of Education certainly does not wield as much power as other cabinet members, the backlash against Secretary DeVos has been heavy and unrelenting. Teachers, students, and ordinary civilians have protested DeVos’s appointment across the country and continue to carefully scrutinize the decisions she makes in her new role. Over one thousand people protested her nomination even before the vote confirmed her spot in the cabinet. Spokesman for the Pennsylvania State Education Association, Wythe Keever, stated, “Betsy DeVos may have survived the confirmation vote, but her agenda may not. This is not the end of the battle against privatization of public schools. It’s only the beginning.” (Behrman, 2017, n.p.).

Such backlash can be largely attributed to DeVos’ lack of experience, both in similar positions and with public schools themselves. Many are concerned with her staunch support of charter schools. The American Civil Liberties Union has been quoted as saying the work DeVos did with the Michigan school system involved, “elevating for-profit schools with no consideration of the severe harm done to traditional public schools”, even though there is no evidence to support charter schools as being more successful as traditional schools (Why is Betsy DeVos, Trump's pick for education secretary, so unpopular?, 2017, n.p.). She and the rest of her family also have a history of campaigning for less oversight for charter schools, which many fear would allow them to pursue a more religious program. DeVos was quoted in 2001 saying that reforming the country’s education system was a means to “advance God’s kingdom” (Why is Betsy DeVos, Trump's pick for education secretary, so unpopular?, 2017, n.p.). Her preference for a charter school system lacks scientific support and her motivations for supporting them are questionable and therefore, given her position of power, quite troubling.

Betsy DeVos has no experience in education. She is not, and never has been, a teacher or professor of any kind and has no knowledge or credentials related to public education. She has never been a principal, superintendent, or school board member, and has never attended a public postsecondary school (Why is Betsy DeVos, Trump's pick for education secretary, so unpopular?, 2017, n.p.). DeVos has been known to use her extreme wealth to influence educational reform in the direction of her own convictions, regardless of scientific evidence. Susan Collins, a Republican senator from Maine, voiced her concern, “that Mrs. DeVos’ lack of experience with public schools will make it difficult for her to fully understand, identify, and assist” any problems that face public schools, particularly those in rural areas (Why is Betsy DeVos, Trump's pick for education secretary, so unpopular?, 2017, n.p.). During her confirmation hearing, she was unable to demonstrate a familiarity and understanding of the Individuals With Disabilities in Education Act, which serves to ensure that disabled students have the necessary accommodations in schools. She later went on to state, rather absurdly, that schools should allow firearms so that they are able to defend against grizzly bear attacks (Why is Betsy DeVos, Trump's pick for education secretary, so unpopular?, 2017, n.p.). DeVos’ clear lack of understanding of the many facets of her position is deeply concerning to many Americans.

DeVos’ plan for public schools could change the way education looks in this country completely. For one, she believes in school choice, meaning she feels that a child should be limited to a certain school district based on income or zip code. DeVos wants to implement a voucher program that would use taxpayer money to pay for private or religious school for underprivileged children. This is worrisome to many because a voucher program would dismantle the public school system, which is already grossly underfunded, in addition to the fact that there is no research to suggest that this would improve test scores. DeVos also advocates for charter schools, which are publicly funded institutions but privately managed. The trouble with this, though, is that federal money would be used at the discretion of whoever is in charge of each particular school. The schools would be able to do what they want, uninhibited by governmental red tape, with no one to answer to other than the people running them. This also could potentially shift the focus in federally funded schools towards religion, which interferes with the separation of church and state.

Betsy DeVos’ appointment to the Secretary of Education’s chair has gained nation- and world-wide attention. Many are incredibly concerned with her lack of experience and credentials and their effect on her ability to do her job well. Her plan for United States public schools promises to upend the education system in this country and change it almost completely, drawing much concern due to the lack of evidence to support these changes.

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