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Acclaimed Education Professor Weighs In on Betsy DeVos Nomination

By Lawrence Lerner

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Last week, the U.S. Senate confirmed mega-GOP donor and school-choice advocate Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education. The vote was contentious and close (51–50), with Vice President Mike Pence casting a historic tie-breaking vote.

To better understand what DeVos' confirmation might mean for public education in the U.S., we sat down with Board of Governors Distinguished Service Professor Alan Sadovnik, one of the nation's premier scholars of sociology of education, urban educational reform, and the history of progressive education.

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DeVos is a big school-choice advocate. Can you offer a brief history of the school-choice movement?

The original school-choice movement began in the south after *Brown v. Board of Education* as a response by white parents to avoid desegregation. Private “segregation academies” were created. The contemporary movement started in the late 1980s and was focused on improving education for urban low-income and minority kids. It had a strong civil rights component. Many urban public schools were failing, but the only choices for these parents were zoned public or private schools. Their mantra was: Zip code should not be destiny. Milwaukee was the first city to offer school vouchers in 1990. Minnesota wrote the first U.S. charter-school law in 1991.

What are charter schools, and how widespread are they now?

Charters are self-governing public schools that are, to varying degrees, independent of their school district. There are charters now in more than 30 states. Some states, like New Jersey and New York, have strict regulations similar to those of district schools—including lottery admissions, hiring criteria (certified teachers only) and accountability standards. Other states, like Arizona, have few accountability standards.

headshot of Professor Alan Sadovnik

*Board of Governors
Distinguished Service Professor
Alan Sadovnik*

And how do school vouchers work?

These are tuition grants that families can use to pay for private or parochial schools. They’re another option pursued by the school-choice movement. The private schools themselves don’t receive the vouchers; the families do. This is how voucher advocates have gotten past the church/state separation for parochial schools. If public funds go to a family, *then* to the school, the separation is upheld, goes to the reasoning.

When you talk about charter-school accountability, what are you referring to?

To ensure equality of education, federal law [Obama’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced No Child Left Behind] requires states to report on how students from every sub-group are performing, and states have to provide assistance to failing schools. But on the local level, charters vary in this type of accountability and reporting. They’re self-governed, and each state has its own charter-school law, and so some charters are more private than others, even though all are funded by public dollars.

What do you expect from DeVos?

DeVos is for increasing the number of charter and voucher schools. As a staunch supporter of religious education, she may also divert funds toward parochial schools in support of her beliefs. The real question is the degree of federal control over accountability. If the charter schools she’s supported in Michigan tell us anything, it’s that there will be no accountability. In fact, not even the worst of these charter schools have been closed.

What has President Trump said he wants to do?

He’s proposed reallocating \$20 million in Title 1 funds [that fall under ESSA] toward charter and voucher schools. This money has been historically used for poor kids in public schools, for lunches and other things. The details are not clear yet, but this may happen under DeVos, which raises all sorts of issues. For instance, in New Jersey, public funds can’t be used for parochial schools, and so we may see a lot of legal challenges. And many states already have caps on how many charter schools can be opened. What happens when states hit those caps? The federal government doesn’t have a lot of leeway here.

Some on the right want DeVos to push not only for school-choice but also for local control of schools—to kill all federal standards *and* take the U.S. Department of Education along with it. Do you think this is a real possibility?

First, states have always had control of education: Article 10 of the U.S. Constitution gives states control over anything not mentioned in the document. But ESSA has significant authority, as did its predecessors, and an act of Congress is required to scrap it. I don't know if that will happen, though it's possible. Meanwhile, DeVos is supposed to enforce the laws on the books.

What does the research say about the performance of charter and voucher schools vs. district public schools?

Overall, the charter-school research has been mixed. It shows that charters and district public schools have equal shares of students who are excellent, in the middle and failing, and there's been not much difference overall. But remember that charter schools are able to cherry-pick who they admit: They have many fewer English-language learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities. So, we may not be comparing apples to apples in these studies.

The evidence suggests that charter and voucher schools are hardly quick fixes and won't increase performance dramatically—that we need a much more expansive policy that includes all public schools: charters, voucher and district schools.

Any final thoughts or predictions?

First, we can be fairly certain that federal Title I money will be moved to states and used for charter and voucher schools. The question is, How much money? How will it happen? Where will that money come from? And how will it impact district public schools? It would likely have a negative effect on the latter because the money may not be replaced. Second, I'd expect a lower level of accountability for charter and voucher schools than for district public schools under ESSA. Finally, if cities like New Orleans and Newark are good case studies, then this influx of federal money to support charter and private voucher schools will likely result in the closing of some public school. How it would happen is not clear yet.

Thanks for sitting down with us.

My pleasure.



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