

Education Needs a Champion

What should we make of the appointment of Betsy DeVos as the U.S. Secretary of Education? The answer is, perhaps, “Not very much.”

For professional educators, the choice of DeVos is a bummer but no surprise. Secretaries of education who champion the system have been rare. And yet our school system has been a robust and productive institution, worthy of pride. It does not yet live up to our dreams, but we have accomplished a great deal, plugging away at the local level.

Does DeVos have any idea that American public schools are among the finest in the world? (Skeptical? Read *50 Myths & Lies That Threaten America's Public Schools*, by Berliner and Glass, for a cogent analysis of studies demonstrating just that.) We take very seriously the mandate to educate citizens for a democracy.

Our insistence on enrolling all children and including scores for all kinds of kids in accountability measures has not kept us from demonstrating excellence in outcomes. Children whose English is not yet fluent, children whose home lives are stressed by poverty and dislocation, children whose handicaps make it harder to develop their abilities — we believe all students deserve to realize their full potential and we do our damndest to meet their needs.

In comparison with children from similar economic situations in other countries, even poor students in American public schools routinely rise to near the top.

Has DeVos even heard about the many studies showing how much childhood poverty contributes to poor academic outcomes? And how concentrations of poverty caused by bad housing policy drag many more children down? Countries that support families can show results in achievement that produce later economic productivity. Does DeVos have a clue about the

evidence that vouchers aggravate the achievement gaps between rich and poor, at public expense?

Does DeVos know that American public educators are among the best-educated, highest-achieving professionals in the workforce? We expect them to earn graduate degrees and add new knowledge and skills throughout their careers.

Furthermore, when their own homes are in splinters after natural disasters, they can still be found holding classes in the schools left standing. They fundraise for field trips, write grants for special projects and work closely with parents to overcome obstacles to student success.

Has DeVos ever even spoken with the best of the scholarly public education critics? They are full of great ideas about how to make all schools better for all students, not just those whose parents can afford the time and expense to drive them to schools of choice. Minority Ph.D.s speak with passion and use solid data to explain how we can improve outcomes for newcomers and poor kids.

How can DeVos possibly understand what better policies and programs would look like without hearing from diverse, well-educated voices of experience?

The sad thing about DeVos' appointment is that she has no idea what an honor and privilege it is to be named leader of the U.S. public education system, with its admirable accomplishments and aspirational goals. She shows no potential for noticing and celebrating our achievements.

DeVos seems to have no concept of the limitations in resources and insight that sometimes cause us to fail. She clearly has no information about the ways federal dollars can leverage important changes at the local level, helping communities connect their efforts for the common good.

No sensible, informed person would claim that our system lives up to our ideals. We have a lot of work to do to make public education as excellent as we all need it to be. In 1978, an educator named Ron Edmonds said: “We can whenever and wherever we choose successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need, in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.”

Though Edmonds would be disappointed at how slow the progress has been, we have moved steadily forward.

The children in our schools deserve a champion. Professional educators deserve a champion. American public education deserves a champion. Instead, what we have at the helm is the next mouthpiece for a longstanding effort to denigrate public education's real accomplishments, in order to free up tax dollars to support private schools.


Hard evidence has shown time and again that this diversion of public assets serves primarily those with material wealth. DeVos will likely ignore the evidence and do what she has always done: Provide uncritical, uninformed support for an elitist agenda.

Fortunately, communities and states retain control of the local program and much of the funding. Fortunately, we are used to having little knowledgeable help from the feds.

Maybe someday that will change. For now, the underlying strengths of our system and our educators will ensure we proceed as usual without a champion in Washington.

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