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Choice for Secretary of Education



The new Secretary of Education is likely to have a hard time pushing her school choice agenda.

Donald Trump's selection of billionaire Betsy DeVos as the next Secretary of Education generated an impressive amount of news when it was announced in late 2016, despite the fact that little attention was paid to education during the campaign. For many observers, it was an alarming choice. DeVos, a prominent philanthropist and well-heeled Republican donor, was born into wealth and married into more of it, and neither she nor her children has ever engaged in the consumer side of public education. She is also an ardent supporter of school choice, charter schools, and vouchers, a fact that has many traditional public school advocates on high alert. To be clear, DeVos is not the education secretary most people expected.

But what will the appointment of this new educator-in-chief actually mean for the nation's public schools? Probably less than people think.

For all the hand-wringing and anxiety over what DeVos aims to do when she becomes secretary, the truth is that within any given federal agency, no single individual wields all that much influence and power. When I was a young political appointee at the Department of Education, working under then-Secretary Richard W. Riley, I remember him telling us that we should think of ourselves as "the Christmas help." We come, and we go, and in the long term it's the career staff who do more to shape the department's

mission and work. (These have always struck me as wise and comforting words from a thoughtful leader.)

For now, the biggest question on the table is what will become of Trump's plan to use \$20 billion of federal education funds to support block grants for state voucher programs, allowing low-income public school children to attend private schools. But even here, DeVos is likely to find that her options are limited.

In the 1950s and '60s, supporters of public school vouchers argued that families that chose to send their children to private school were unfairly being asked to pay double their share for education. Voucher advocates argued that those families paid taxes to support public school and tuition for private school. They should be given a voucher for the tax money they were already spending on education, which they could then apply to a school of their choice, public or private. Later and up to today, support for vouchers became more of a call for equity. Why should poor children be forced to languish in terrible, underfunded schools? Shouldn't their parents be able to use their share of tax money to choose a better school for their children, even if it is religious or privately operated?

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 13 states and the District of Columbia operate voucher plans, with wide variations in scale, student eligibility requirements, and other details. In 2011, the Center on Education Policy (the organization I lead) surveyed the available research on voucher programs in Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida, and the District of Columbia. The research found little or no evidence of test score gains among students who used vouchers to attend private schools. By and large, their scores were no better than those of similar students attending their old public schools.

Increasingly, however, Americans see achievement testing as just one among many measures of school quality. When seeking a good school for their children, parents also value safety, social and emotional learning, arts and music education, opportunities for career exploration, and other factors that contribute to a well-rounded education. This shift in thinking may whet the appetite for school choice options like vouchers despite the current lack of evidence.

DeVos may attempt to follow through on Trump's call for a major new investment in vouchers, but time will tell whether she can maneuver Congress into reallocating the federal dollars required to fund such a program and use the bully pulpit effectively enough to build support for vouchers among parents and state and local leaders.

ESSA restrictions

Another pressing question is what, if anything, DeVos will try to do to put her own imprint on the now year-old Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). And here, in a bit of Shakespearean irony, she will be