

Does DeVos Really Want a Safe and Nurturing Environment for All Students?

By [Shawnta S. Barnes](#) - March 20, 2018



“Get out! Go to ISS!”

If I had a dollar for every time a student was kicked out of class, I could retire from teaching now. We have a problem in Indiana and in schools across our nation. Classrooms are out of control and teachers are struggling to create a culture of learning within their four walls.

I had great mentors early in my career that helped me learn that building relationships with students is key. This is the foundation teachers have to build upon to be able to teach in their classrooms. The problem is many teachers don't have the supports or tools to learn how to improve classroom management nor do their schools have systems in place to help them.

This is why I started following House Bill 1421 School Discipline and gave testimony to the Senate Education and Career Development committee in favor of the bill. This bill aims to reduce the number of times students are out of the classroom due to exclusionary practices. It requires schools to have a plan beginning with the 2019-2020 school year to train teachers and provide professional development to help school staff handle discipline appropriately. This is important because the U.S. Department of Education in 2014 released data showing Indiana as one of eleven states with higher gaps than the nation between the suspension rates of black male and female students versus their white counterparts. Indiana was also one of five states that reported higher suspension rates for every racial/ethnic group.

We have to start at the local level to help Hoosier students because federal protections might not be there for our students. In a recent 60 Minutes interview, journalist Lesley Stahl described US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos as a ‘devoted deregulator’ meaning she is undoing past legislation. DeVos stated her department has, “begun looking at and rolling back a lot of the overreach of the federal government in education.”

Part of DeVos’ role is overseeing students’ civil rights. According to the interview:

She’s now considering scrapping the Obama era guidance on how to identify, avoid, and remedy discriminatory discipline which aims to prevent schools from punishing students of color more harshly than their white classmates.

When asked to respond to why she is considering scrapping this guidance, DeVos stated, “We are studying that rule. We need to ensure that all students have an opportunity to learn in a safe and nurturing environment and all students means all students.” The problem is DeVos is not worried about all students. In this same interview, she admitted that in her home state of Michigan where her family’s name is plastered across buildings, she has not visited struggling schools. Educators know that in addition to academics many struggling schools have discipline issues. The truth is DeVos wants ‘a safe and nurturing environment’ even if that means removing students and if all of those students happen to be black, oh well.

This is why I assert, we all have to get involved at the local level. We can't wait on the federal government to save us or our students. I'm pleased to report HB 1421 was passed out of the Senate with a vote of 46 to 3. If you know anything about policy, during each round amendments are made. I'm concerned about the most recent amendment made when the full Senate passed the bill. The amendment states the DOE may not "require or pressure a school corporation to adopt any aspect of the model plan," and the DOE "cannot conduct reviews, other than any reviews the department currently conducts, of school discipline plans." Essentially, a school could have a crappy plan and implement poor training and the DOE could not conduct a review or suggest the school follow the model provided by its department. Although, I don't like this; I don't believe hope is lost.

Once Governor Holcomb signs the bill, it becomes law, but our work doesn't stop there. As parents, educators, and community members, we are the stakeholders who should hold our local schools accountable. You should be aware of what is taking place and if you believe the discipline practices at your child's school is not right, speak up and take action.