

Education Proficiency Lacking; No Time for Growth – U.S. Education Secretary Confirmation Hearing of Betsy DeVos

By Shawnta S. Barnes – January 19, 2017



The U.S. Secretary of Education confirmation hearing for Betsy DeVos took place yesterday. Her nomination by President-elect Trump is controversial because of her lack of education experience. When former U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman introduced Mrs. DeVos he said, “I know that some people are questioning her qualifications to be Secretary of Education and too many of those questions, to me,

seems to be based on the fact that she doesn’t come from within the education establishment, but honestly I believe that today that’s one of the most important qualifications you could have for this job.” Senator Lamar Alexander, Health, Education, Labor & Pensions Committee Chair, seemed to share the same sentiment when he stated, “I believe she is in the mainstream of public opinion and her critics are not.” It was clear from the beginning of the proceedings, Sen. Alexander supports Mrs. DeVos. He referred to the biblical book of Matthew and followed with an emphasis on the Golden Rule – “To treat others how you would like to be treated” before the senators were allotted five minutes to ask questions. He also denied all requests for a second round of follow-up questions. Was this to truly follow the precedent he kept referencing or was it to shield Mrs. DeVos from exposing her lack of knowledge about what this job

demands? Below, are some of Mrs. DeVos' exchanges with the committee. Her confirmation hearing in it's entirety can be viewed on PBS Newshour's YouTube channel.

Sen. Mike Enzi R-Wyoming: Can you talk about your plans to engage rural and frontier states and communities in that process (implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act)?

DeVos: I too enjoyed our meeting in your office. I particularly enjoyed hearing a little bit about the special needs of schools like the Wapiti school that has the grizzly bear fence surrounding it. I think that is a unique need to Wyoming. Certainly rural schools and rural settings require different approaches and different options. I refer to the Every Student Succeeds Act and I think the implementation of that and Wyoming's plan for that will be particularly important to recognize the unique needs of the rural population that you have as well as the many other states represented here in the committee. When we think about the future, I think about the opportunity for more choices and options for those parents at a distance learning type of a situation and the possibility that course choices or online choices could be offered in ways that have not been previously.

Sen. Patty Murray D-Washington: Can you commit to us tonight that you will not work to privatize public schools or cut a single penny from public education?

DeVos: Senator thanks for that question. I look forward, if confirmed, to working with you to talk about how we would address the needs of all parents and all students and we acknowledge today that not all schools are working for the students that are assigned to them and I am hopeful that we can work together to find common ground and ways that we can solve those issues and empower parents to make choices on behalf of their children.

Sen. Orrin Hatch R-Utah: Do you support increasing transparency regarding loan results for students and parents to use when deciding upon a post-secondary school?

DeVos: I agree with you 100% that the issue of student debt and the amount of student debt, over 1.3 trillion dollars right now up almost 1000% in the last eight

years, is a very serious issue and one which we all have to I think we have to pay very close attention to and resolve in some way.

Sen. Bernie Sanders I-Vermont: Some of us believe we should make public colleges and universities tuition free so that every young person in this country regardless of income does have that option; that's not the case today. Will you work with me and others to make public colleges and universities tuition free through federal and state efforts?

DeVos: Senator, I think that's a really interesting idea and it's really great to consider and think about but I think we also have to consider the fact that there's nothing in life that's truly free; somebody's going to pay for it.

Sen.Sanders: What are your proposals about making childcare universal for our working families?

DeVos: That certainly is a burden and I can understand the challenge that family, that young mother would face in deciding how to best serve her child's needs. Again I think if we're talking about the future of that child and their education, I would look forward to working with you. I know we have common ground on a lot of things. We could find ways to work together to ensure that young mom's child will have a great opportunity for a great education in the future

Sen. Bob Casey D-Pennsylvania: In 2011, the Department of Education issued guidance on Title IX by this administration, the current administration, I ask would you uphold that 2011 Title IX guidance as it relates to sexual assault on campus?

DeVos: If confirmed, I would look forward to working with you and your colleagues and understand the range of opinions and understand the issues from the higher ed institutions that are charged with resolving these and addressing them and I would look forward to working together to find some resolutions.

Sen. Bob Casey: I guess you're not going to give me a yes or no answer about committing to- about upholding that guidance.

DeVos: It would be premature to for me to do that today.

Sen. Bob Casey: The organization (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education) that has that position which is contrary to the law, the current law, and contrary to the spirit of what we try to do in that piece of legislation is a recipient of donations from you totaling about twenty-five thousand bucks over four years. I hope, I hope, that's not a conflict of interest, but I would hope you would make a definitive commitment as a nominee to enforce the law as it relates to sexual assault on college campuses.

Sen. Al Franken D-Minnesota: I would like your views on the relative advantage of measuring — doing assessments and using assessments to measure proficiency or measure growth.

DeVos: If I am understanding your question correctly around proficiency I would also correlate it to competency and mastery so that you—each student is measured according to the advancement that they are making in each subject area.

Franken: Well that's growth; that's not proficiency.

Sen. Bill Cassidy R-Louisiana: Do you view the role of the U.S. Secretary of Education as an opportunity to advance your personal education views and agenda?

DeVos: Not mine's personally. I going to hopefully be able to advance the President-elect's and also the views of many many parents nationally.

When Mrs. DeVos would not or could respond she defaulted to, "I look forward to working with you" as her response. When a U.S. Secretary of Education nominee cannot articulate the difference between growth and proficiency, we should be concerned. When she was asked her views about guns in school, she referred back to the Wapiti school in Wyoming and expressed the need for a gun to keep out grizzlies. These responses and her inability to give in-depth answers on current educational issues leave us all to wonder how education will change under her leadership if she is confirmed.