

POLICY INITIATIVES OF PRESIDENT TRUMP'S CABINET:

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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The Dilenschneider Group

The Chrysler Building • 405 Lexington Avenue, 57th Floor • New York, N.Y. 10174

Telephone: (212) 922-0900

Website: www.dilenschneidergroup.com

The Trump Administration is now in its second year in office, and extensive changes are being made by both the White House and the major agencies. Every month, for your background information, we are issuing a special report on one area of change. Here is the sixth report, on education.

A number of Republican presidents and presidential candidates have wanted to shut down the Department of Education.

The arguments over the years have been basically the same: Education is the prerogative of the states; local school boards should determine the educational standards in their communities; the education bureaucracy is too unwieldy. But that very bureaucracy, backed by the teachers' unions, has stymied efforts to weaken or even shut down the department. In fact, President Reagan saw it grow during his two terms in office.

The Trump administration, however, may succeed in changing the face of education in America beyond the expectations of even its most ardent supporters by privatizing much of the system through school vouchers and charter schools.

Whatever differences of opinion there may be over that policy, however, there is bipartisan agreement about the need for more vocational education in America. President Trump has just signed a \$1 billion renewal of the Career and Technical Education Act which will provide grants for students to get on-the-job training in technical fields that need skilled workers. The CTE Act was first approved in 2006, and its unanimous passage by the House and Senate last week was the first time it has been renewed in 12 years.

Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos is a billionaire heiress, philanthropist and devout Christian conservative with a lifelong interest in changing education and was tapped to join President Trump's cabinet. She argues that monopolistic public education is a dead-end for too many students. And she has been quoted by Politico as saying her mission in education is to "advance God's kingdom."

Secretary DeVos is a fierce advocate for charter schools, dismissing critics who say they take money away from public schools, are insufficiently regulated and turn away from the American principle that every child deserves a free public education. That is why she calls public schools "government schools."

The American Civil Liberties Union has argued that the diversion of taxpayer money into private and parochial schools violates the separation of church and state. But a number of judges have disagreed. The Supreme Court last year held that public money may be spent on religious school facilities. There are now charter schools in 43 states, with more pending.

Secretary DeVos is supported by many Republicans in her efforts to remake American education. Countless business leaders have complained that the system is no longer producing graduates with the skills needed in today's global economy.

The respected Pew Research Center says American children are in the middle of the pack globally when schools are ranked in science, math and reading. The National Assessment for Educational Progress recently reported that after years of rising, fourth and eighth grade math scores declined. The Program for International Student Assessment ranks the U.S. 31st in math literacy and 23rd in science among 15-year-old students.

In 2013, the U.S. spent more per student—\$15,700—than any other country; 70 percent was public money, 25 percent came from parents, the rest was private money. Nevertheless, the best educated students in the world are found in Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Finland, Estonia, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Canada.

Despite the support she receives from many Republicans and business leaders, Secretary DeVos has encountered strong headwinds since she was nominated. She has been widely attacked for never attending a public school, never holding a job in education and never holding elective office. Vice President Pence had to break a tie in the Senate to confirm her, so close was the vote.

After advancing charter schools in her home state of Michigan, she was asked if the state's schools had improved overall. "I can't say," she told Lesley Stahl of CBS News. State tests have found that Secretary DeVos's efforts to push new charter schools in Michigan with what many thought were insufficient standards and regulations resulted in lower charter school scores than the statewide average. It's not clear, however, if that is changing as the schools become more established.

Beyond her goal of giving parents more choice on where to send their children to school, Secretary DeVos has stepped into the spotlight on controversial issues that even some supporters think may have weakened her efforts. For example, during her confirmation hearing she argued that schools should arm their teachers to ward off potential grizzly bear attacks. She set up a commission on school safety that does not have a mandate to even consider gun violence. When she set up the commission, there had already been 59 school shooting deaths and 93 injuries in the time since she took office.

She has not taken a stand on whether immigrant children should be allowed to attend public schools.

Agreeing wholeheartedly with President Trump's position that there are too many federal regulations, Secretary DeVos has removed 72 guidelines on how schools must handle disabled children. She also opposes special accommodations for transgender children.

In higher education, Secretary DeVos argues that for-profit schools give students who otherwise wouldn't get to college the opportunity to succeed. She has proposed ending loan forgiveness for students unable to pay their for-profit school debts, even if they can't get jobs after finishing their studies.

What is ahead? This is a very hot topic—expect many from all sides to weigh in on dozens of issues. However, do not look for significant change in the near future. President Trump has proposed merging the Department of Education with the Department of Labor, but the idea was not included in his budget for fiscal year 2019. Instead, the budget calls for \$71.6 billion in education spending, an increase of \$540 million over FY 2018.