



Written by [Staff](#) on March 20, 2017

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Leftist Conriptions Against School Choice

Item: *An article for the Washington Post's "Outlook" section on February 12, 2017, was written by one Elizabeth Wade, a Virginian from Richmond who acknowledged that she was not "political," and did not recall voting at any level ever, "except in presidential elections." The largest daily publication in the nation's capital gave her a prominent position in the Sunday paper to express her opposition to (then) newly confirmed Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.*

The writer said that, through research, she had "learned [DeVos] is a billionaire who contributes a lot of money to the Republican Party. I learned she has never been in public schools, not as a student, a parent, an educator or an administrator. There was nothing in her biography that suggested to me she had anything to contribute to the millions of public school children and teachers who would be under her leadership."

Now, the writer said, she and her family and friends talk politics "all the time." Wrote Wade, "Most of my girlfriends have transformed along with me.... Now half of our texts or phone calls are about Trump and DeVos."

The secretary's confirmation, we are told, "came as a huge blow" to the writer.

Item: *When DeVos was initially nominated, the Washington Post's education reporter Emma Brown commented that "Trump's pick has intensified what already was a polarized debate about school choice."*

The paper, in its November 23 edition, in a piece entitled "Trump picks billionaire Betsy DeVos, school voucher advocate, as education secretary," went on to quote American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten. The labor leader said that Trump's selection "makes it loud and clear that his education policy will focus on privatizing, defunding and destroying public education in America."

Correction: "Public education" has been doing a pretty good job of hurting itself. Still, that did not stop the massive and largely unfair reaction directed against a person who supports making choices available to families with children in government schools.

The opposition against DeVos was orchestrated in large part by the public teachers' unions. They are major supporters of the Democratic Party. We know that's true because we read it in the *Washington Post* — probably placed at the tail of an article to demonstrate its "balanced" coverage.

The inveighing against this nomination, and the claims about how "public education" is going to be annihilated, were widespread in the so-called mainstream media. Here's a representative sample, as gathered by Frederick Hess for *Education Next*:

Just days after DeVos's nomination was announced, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed attacking her as anti-science because ... she supports a less regulated version of charter schooling than did the op-ed's author. *The New Yorker* wrung its hands at the sinister threat posed by DeVos having attended a religious high school. AFT president Randi Weingarten went to the National Press Club to denounce DeVos for being anti-education, anti-teacher, and a sworn enemy of the nation's children.

The National Education Association groused too, saying that DeVos is "best known for her anti-public education campaign." The NEA, in its official statement against the nomination, blasted her support for "vouchers — which take away funding and local control from our public schools — to fund private



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schools at taxpayers' expense."

That is to be expected from the National Education Association, which has boasted that there would be no Cabinet-level Department of Education without its backing. (A smaller department was part of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare before Jimmy Carter paid back his political debt.) Anthony Fisher of *Reason* not long ago recalled that the creation of the Cabinet-level department represented "Carter's fulfillment of a 1976 presidential campaign promise, when he earned the endorsement of the largest labor union in the United States — the National Education Association (NEA)."

We are paying dearly for this concentration of power, with the overreaching growing longer over the years.

There's no doubt that the Obama administration, for example, spent plenty of money for "education." Their "intellectuals" imagined that they knew what was best for districts across the entire land. You can tell they are intellectuals because they can't see what is obvious: All that money was not helping and may have been hurting. We were treated with what was supposed to be the largest "school turnaround" project in history, which of course had a price tag in the billions: the School Information Grant (SIG) program. Did this magic potion cure all? Of course not.

Over the course of the Obama administration, as Andy Smarick noted in *U.S. News & World Report*, the results that did trickle in kept bringing bad news. "Consistent with previous 'turnaround' programs, the failing schools receiving funding weren't making anywhere near the promised progress. In fact, many were making no progress and some were getting worse." So Education Secretary Arne Duncan and President Obama opened the taxpayers' money spigot wider.

The *U.S. News* account, dated January 25, continued:

The damning final evaluation of the SIG program was released — just a coincidence, we're told — two days before the administration walked out the door. Funded by the very Department of Education that ran the program and conducted by two respected research institutions, the study found that SIG had no influence on student achievement. None.

Schools that received massive SIG funding and support saw no gains in test scores, graduation rates or college-going rates compared to similar schools that weren't part of SIG. The traditional approach failed again. Billions and billions of dollars were wasted. Most importantly, countless boys and girls are still assigned to those schools.

Thanks for nothing. Yet, many politicians still insist that American "education" will evaporate without a massive federal bureaucracy to tell us how our children should be taught.

The most vocal recent criticism has been directed, not against those who have failed, but against someone who might offer a break from the top-down, miscarrying authoritarian policies. In doing so, the critics have actually run roughshod over one of the key statutory purposes spelled out in the Department of Educational Organization Act that created the Cabinet-level Education Department.

This is a point not missed by Nat Malkus, a research fellow in education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. He specializes in K-12 education, with focuses on school choice and charter schools, among others. In a piece for the Real Clear Education website dated February 13, Malkus observed that those who opposed DeVos had been



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remarkably successful in framing her as an “enemy of public education.” But they have done so in poor faith, by conflating public education with its primary delivery system: traditional public schools. ED’s purpose is to promote states’ local school systems and other instrumentalities, which include states’ charter laws and private school choice programs.

During the campaign against Trump’s nomination, here is what CNN’s Bakari Sellers apparently found unconscionable: DeVos is a “proponent of a for-profit institution! She does not believe in the public school system!”

Somehow that indictment did not mortify John Stossel, who asked rhetorically in a column in late December:

Is your for-profit local supermarket less “public” than your kid’s school? No! For-profit institutions serve the public and usually do it better than governments do.

Let’s stop calling government schools “public.” Call them what they are: “government-run” schools.

Anyway, the charter schools DeVos supports are public. They’re just not controlled by the usual crowd of education bureaucrats. That’s why the education establishment hates them. The establishment has had total control for a century and doesn’t want to lose it.

They complain that DeVos:

- Doesn’t have a degree in education!
- Has no teaching experience!
- Didn’t attend government schools!
- Didn’t send her kids to “public” school!

But that was also true about Arne Duncan, President Obama’s education secretary. We didn’t hear the same complaints about Duncan. Perhaps avoiding government-run education helps people become successful.

Let’s again examine the status quo. Virtually wherever you look, the establishment has gotten more money, but has not obtained better results. As a Cato Institute study recounted in 2014: “The performance of 17-year-olds has been essentially stagnant across all subjects since the federal government began collecting trend data around 1970, despite a near tripling of the inflation-adjusted cost of putting a child through the K-12 system.”

Simply throwing more money at a failing system isn’t the best use of limited resources. And if doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results isn’t insanity — as the oft-quoted line has it — it is certainly imprudent.

Professor Thomas Sowell has pointed out that the teachers’ unions and their political allies rightfully see DeVos and school choice as a menace to their monopoly. Sowell explained why that is a risk:

She has, for more than 20 years, been promoting programs, laws and policies that enable parents to choose which schools their children will attend — whether these are charter schools, voucher schools or parochial schools.

Some of these charter schools — especially those in the chain of the Success Academy schools and the chain of the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) schools — operate in low-income, minority



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neighborhoods in the inner-cities, and turn out graduates who can match the educational performances of students in affluent suburbs.

What is even more remarkable, these charter schools are often housed in the very same buildings, in the very same ghettos, where students in the regular public schools fail to learn even the basics in English or math.

You and I may think this is great. But, to the teachers' unions, such charter schools are a major threat to their members' jobs — and ultimately to the unions' power or existence.

The teachers' unions and their bought politicians are also worried that the new education secretary does not see homeschooling proponents as deadly opponents. In an interview in the Spring 2013 issue of *Philanthropy*, DeVos said:

Homeschooling represents another perfectly valid educational option....To the extent that homeschooling puts parents back in charge of their kids' education, more power to them.

Gracious, we can't have that, can we? Monopolists sure don't think so.

To be clear, even proponents do not maintain that charter schools are a panacea. Still, studies have found that "the charter school sector is getting better on average and ... charter schools are benefiting low-income, disadvantaged, and special education students," according to Dr. Margaret Raymond, director of Stanford University's Center on Research on Education Outcomes. While conservatives have many legitimate gripes about public schools, many of the solutions being proposed — often by very well-intended Americans — boil down to bait-and-switch gimmicks. The federal money is the alluring bait, but it hangs on a hidden hook: ultimate federal controls. Just as there is no free lunch, there is no "free" federally financed education — because eventually he who pays the piper will call the tune. That's more than a fable: It's a fact of life.

Nonetheless, the option for school choice allows parents to seek what they want for their children, rather than to have those decisions imposed by bureaucrats and politicians.

The ability to make choices is part of the bedrock of liberty. Diana Furchtgott-Roth, director of Economics21 at the Manhattan Institute, has made a key observation that speaks to that. Writing in "MarketWatch" for the *Wall Street Journal*, the columnist pointed out that if parents don't like their children's charter schools, they can leave.

"This threat of exit gives charter schools an incentive to raise school quality in order to retain students — the same incentive faced by millions of products and services across America," she wrote in February. "Secretary DeVos has an opportunity to allow education to catch up."

— William P. Hoar



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