



3-10-2017

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Powell, Dave. "Should We Give Betsy DeVos a Chance? I Don't Think So" Education Week (March 10, 2017).

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Abstract

Jennifer Steele, who teaches at American University, has made a heroic attempt to convince us that Betsy DeVos [actually deserves a lot more credit than she's been getting](#) for her performance as secretary of education so far. While I appreciate the sentiment—everybody deserves a fair shake, and should be judged on what they actually do, not what we think they might do—I have to say I'm not convinced. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Betsy DeVos, Secretary of Education, education policy, Jennifer Steele

Disciplines

Educational Leadership | Education Policy

Comments

This piece appeared on *Education Week* as part of Dr. Powell's opinion blog, "The K-12 Contrarian." The original version is available online [here](#).



Should We Give Betsy DeVos a Chance? I Don't Think So

By Dave Powell on March 10, 2017 8:39 AM |

Jennifer Steele, who teaches at American University, has made a heroic attempt to convince us that Betsy DeVos [actually deserves a lot more credit than she's been getting](#) for her performance as secretary of education so far. While I appreciate the sentiment—everybody deserves a fair shake, and should be judged on what they actually do, not what we think they might do—I have to say I'm not convinced.

The case Steele makes revolves largely around the idea that people on "the left" might be able to find common cause with DeVos over a shared concern: the intrusion of the federal government into education policymaking. This seems like an attractive argument on the surface, but once you put it in context the luster quickly wears off. For starters, the issue Steele points to as a place to find common ground isn't one that should have much appeal to true liberals. The liberal consensus of the second half of the 20th century was forged over the idea that the federal government has a powerful role to play in protecting the most vulnerable members of society, and many of the most important social gains we made in that period would not have been possible without federal support. The *Brown* decision, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and, of course, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act all cemented gains made by Americans who poured their souls into making our society better.

These policies have frayed, partly because all policies fade in time and need renewal, but also because they have been unfairly characterized as big government intrusions—something only people unconcerned by the plight of the people these policies have helped could argue.

The fact is that "top down solutions" like voting rights, school lunches, protection from discrimination, and school integration didn't look so bad when they weren't tethered to bad ideas. Let me put that another way: education policy for the last twenty years has been based on the flawed assumption that all we need to do to make our schools better is hold them accountable for student learning. Whether your method of choice was an endless battery of standardized tests or common standards in reading and math or, well, a method of choice (meaning charters or vouchers), the goal was clear: this was all about accountability. But the foundational assumption here—that some form of competition buttressed by a carrot-and-stick approach to reform would

yield the results we wanted—is certainly open to debate. In an earlier era the assumption was that schools would get better if we made them more equal. See the difference?

But now commenters like Steele are suggesting that we trust DeVos, in spite of the fact that she has never shown so much as an inkling of understanding of (let alone respect for) the public school system we built. DeVos is lionized in conservative circles as "mainstream" and even "visionary," a characterization that legitimizes her as a qualified reformer and is as hard to fathom as the notion that the blind squirrel found a nut because he spent so much time looking for it. Steele abets this characterization by setting the bar so low that almost anyone could clear it. For example, she acknowledges that DeVos said teachers are in "receive mode," but says what she meant was that teachers need more autonomy to do their work. She gives DeVos credit for tweeting meaningless platitudes like "You have to have teachers who are empowered to facilitate great teaching" and "Great teachers deserve freedom and flexibility, not to constantly be on the receiving end of government dictates." The first statement is so mundane that it's practically meaningless; the second is obviously disingenuous.

I say this because I know, and I think you do too, that most of the schools of choice that DeVos would seem to favor are not exactly bastions of teacher autonomy. Many, in fact, rely on carefully scripted instruction and exceptionally tight behavioral regimes that not only narrow the range of student experience but simultaneously take decision-making right out of the hands of teachers. Make no mistake about it: DeVos and her conservative friends only want "local control" as long as they have local control. Maybe Steele missed DeVos' "[defiant](#)" speech at CPAC, where she inveighed against Obama's order protecting the rights of LGBTQ students as "a very huge example of Obama administration overreach, one-size-fits-all approach to issues best solved at [the] personal and local level." In her mind, her job is to "protect students and teachers' flexibility and protect and preserve personal freedoms." That's not the same thing as giving teachers the power to decide how to do their jobs *as educators* effectively. It's a radical vision of teachers as conservative social activists—exactly the kind of thing conservatives often accuse "liberal" teachers of engaging in.

I think it's clear that "solved at the personal and local level" means "we want to deal with these issues in the places where we believe we can win them." It's really that simple.

And that's the context that is missing from Steele's piece. Everything with DeVos comes back to a simple refrain: local control. Steele wants to read this as a glimmer of hope we can cling to if we would like to see public education survive. It reminds me of the time Chuck Schumer tried to convince us that a winning strategy for Democrats might be to work with Trump on an infrastructure bill...until about five minutes later, when he realized that this is [all part of the privatization game too](#). Like her boss, DeVos is a true believer, but while he believes only in himself she believes in something else. Nothing seems to guide her more than her firm conviction that deregulation and choice are the solutions to our educational problems. She believes that, I think, because she buys the argument that "elites" have hijacked our country and that the "real" Americans see the world the way she does. She believes that godless bureaucrats want to interrupt her efforts to "[advance God's kingdom](#)," so she champions choice as a means to a very clear end. I'm all for religion, but it belongs in churches, not schools.

That leads us to the bottom line. When DeVos says that teachers need to get out of "receive mode," she's not suggesting that we strengthen public education by giving more power to teachers—I don't care how many school visits she does with Randi Weingarten. She's parroting the party line. If there is a left *left* in education, it should, indeed, be concerned with teacher autonomy—and it should be redoubling its efforts to focus on the powerful role schools can play in elevating people out of poverty and ensconcing teachers firmly as members of a respected professional class. It should also focus on explaining to the people DeVos appeals to that they have a stake in public education too. In the end, DeVos's solution to the poverty problem is vouchers; her solution to every problem, essentially, is vouchers. Her half-hearted defense of autonomy only serves that master. How anyone could miss that is beyond me. She's written it all over the wall.

I know she's only been on the job for a month, but Betsy DeVos has had her chance to let us know who she is and what she stands for—she's had [200 million chances](#), in fact. Maybe she no longer thinks public education is a "monopoly" or a "dead end," but I think it's probably true that [she is who we thought she was](#). The best thing we can do now is stay vigilant and articulate an alternative. The last thing we should do is let her off the hook. It's going to be a long slog.