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Abstract

By now you have probably heard about Betsy DeVos' big day out recently. She tried to visit a middle school in Washington but found the front door blocked when she showed up. This led, of course, to the publication of an already-infamous **cartoon** suggesting that DeVos is actually a modern-day Civil Rights warrior, and to the suggestion that protesters blocking DeVos at the schoolhouse door was the functional (if not moral) equivalent of preventing black children from attending segregated schools in the 1950s and '60s. It's an argument that is morally wrong, historically stupid, and patently offensive. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

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Maybe It's Time to Put Betsy DeVos in 'Receive Mode'

By Dave Powell on February 20, 2017 11:29 AM |

By now you have probably heard about Betsy DeVos' big day out recently. She tried to visit a middle school in Washington but found the front door blocked when she showed up. This led, of course, to the publication of an already-infamous [cartoon](#) suggesting that DeVos is actually a modern-day Civil Rights warrior, and to the suggestion that protesters blocking DeVos at the schoolhouse door was the functional (if not moral) equivalent of preventing black children from attending segregated schools in the 1950s and '60s. It's an argument that is morally wrong, historically stupid, and patently offensive.

Eventually, of course, DeVos found her way in, and I just want to send a message to those protesters who tried to keep her out: please don't do that anymore. We're much better off letting DeVos have her public appearances so she can share more of her "[mainstream](#)" wisdom with us and continue serving us with reminders of how hysterical we all are for thinking that her real goal is to cripple public education. Because nothing, we're told, could be further from the truth.

Except, well, it sure looks like her only real goal is to cripple public education. Last week she [gave an interview](#) in which she more or less confirmed not only that she doesn't have a clue about why the U.S. Department of Education exists, but also that she believes all the things we thought she believed. Mostly the interview is framed as a do-over for DeVos in the aftermath of her disastrous confirmation hearing. For example, instead of saying that she thought it was okay for guns to be in schools because of the ongoing threat posed by grizzlies DeVos conceded, given another chance to answer the question, that she should have said that it's okay for guns to be in schools because of the ongoing threat posed by grizzlies. Yes, you read that sentence correctly. "It was a valid illustration," she said. "It probably wasn't the best illustration I could have given."

Translation: I need to be more politically correct, but I still believe guns should be allowed in schools. Because grizzlies.

There are other reassuring nuggets of wisdom in the interview. You may not be surprised to know, for example, that DeVos "literally" had "never given...a thought" to being Secretary of

Education until after the election happened. Okay, so, yeah--most of us don't sit around dreaming about what it would be like to be Secretary of Education, but when you show such a clear lack of understanding for the job it's probably not the best idea to go on the record and admit that you never even *thought* about what it would be like to have the job before you took it. This reminds me of a [great line someone posted on Twitter](#) after DeVos was confirmed: DeVos being named Secretary of Education is a victory for every unqualified person who has ever gotten a job they don't understand at a place they hate. If that doesn't sum it up, I don't know what does.

There's more: "I expect there will be more public charter schools," she said, describing how she's going to use [all the power she allegedly doesn't have](#) to shape education policy. "I expect there will be more private schools," she added. "I expect there will be more virtual schools." To make sure she was being abundantly clear on the issue, she even gratuitously added: "I expect there will be more schools of any kind that haven't even been invented yet." Hear that? More schools of any kind that haven't even been *invented* yet! Now this is exciting.

I have no idea what it means, but one thing's for sure: these new schools won't be public, at least not in the traditional sense. They'll have charters, and they'll exist in virtual spaces, and many of them will be supported by private investors who will say that they don't care if their schools make money or not--they just want to find a way to "give back" to a society that has given so much to them. (Pro tip: paying taxes to support universal public education is a great way to give back.) Secretly, though, they'll tell reassure each other that there's no point of bankrolling anything, even a school, if it's going to lose money. Investors want to know that their money is being spent on successful schools, not unsuccessful ones. Parents, too, want to be able to choose good schools for their kids, not bad ones. What's the point in being able to vote with your feet if you're only going to be able to choose schools that are no better than the schools you're running away from? In no time flat, if we do this right, every school will be excellent. Because competition.

But the highlight of DeVos' first few days on the job has to be the [condescending way she insulted the teachers at Jefferson Middle School](#) after she got around that blocked front door and made her way inside. Here's [what she had to say](#) about the teachers she met:

I visited a school on Friday and met with some wonderful, genuine, sincere teachers who pour their heart and soul into their classrooms and their students and our conversation was not long enough to draw out of them what is limiting them from being even more success [sic?] from what they are currently. But I can tell the attitude is more of a 'receive mode.' They're waiting to be told what they have to do, and that's not going to bring success to an individual child. You have to have teachers who are empowered to facilitate great teaching.

This was meant, I think, as a hackneyed nod to the importance of teacher autonomy, but if you think about what DeVos said in the context of her other views it's clear that teacher autonomy was the last thing on her mind. Let me put it like this: if Betsy DeVos cared about giving teachers what they need to be autonomous professionals she wouldn't be undermining their work by encouraging a massive social experiment that we already know will lead to increased segregation and erode the foundation of our shared commitment to democracy, making their jobs

more difficult. Instead of assuming teachers are in "receive mode," waiting to be told what to do, she should be listening to them.

But she's not listening. She's saying: teachers are always in "receive mode" because they're used to being told what to do. They *want* to be told what to do, even. They're dependent on the government to tell them what to do and think. This is just another naked attempt to suggest that federal involvement in education is unconstitutional (not true), unnecessary (also not true), and a sign of our slavish dependence on a godless nanny state. (No, that's not true, either.)

I'm not going to argue that some teachers *aren't* in receive mode because too many are, in one way or another. This is mainly because most of them have never been allowed to feel good about the work they do, let alone have any sense of control over it. That's not only the fault of misguided reform efforts like *No Child Left Behind*, though. It's also a consequence of the ongoing, concerted effort to convince the public that public education has failed--an effort aided, abetted, and even funded by people like Betsy DeVos who have a vested interest in making that failure a reality.

You know what I think? I think maybe we ought to put Betsy DeVos in "receive mode." Looking at her interviews, listening to her talk, finding out more about her half-baked ideas--all of it makes me think that she still has a lot of learning left to do if she's actually serious about improving education. Note that I didn't say *public* education; I think DeVos has made it more than clear that public education is not a priority for her any more than environmental protection is a priority for the new head of the Environmental Protection Agency or any more than protecting peoples' health (or serving humans) is a priority for the new head of the Department of Health and Human Services. The foxes are in the henhouse. The people charged with protecting our public interest in education, health, the environment, and other public resources are ready to sell them off to the highest bidder. And take a cut, presumably, in the process.

Add it all up and it comes down to this: DeVos goes to work everyday convinced that her critics "[want to make my life a living hell](#)," and she seems determined to return the favor. The irony, of course, is that she has much more power to make the lives of many people a "living hell" by instituting policies that undermine our historical commitment to equity in America's public schools than they could possibly have over her. And this seems to be exactly what she plans to do. In fact, she concluded her interview by letting it slip that she really doesn't even want the job at all. "It would be fine with me," she said, "to have myself worked out of a job." I think for a lot of people the feeling is mutual, Betsy.