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And What If DeVos Is Confirmed?

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Abstract

So today is the big day: the Senate is expected to finally vote on Betsy DeVos's nomination to become the next U.S. Secretary of Education, and Vice President Mike Pence is poised to break an expected tie in her favor. I doubt very much that anything other than the expected result is going to happen. After all, we live in an age when too many [politicians pick their voters](#), not the other way around. My bet is that Collins and Murkowski were allowed to announce their votes against DeVos because the leadership had already conducted a tight whip count and felt confident that they had the votes to get DeVos through. Everything else has been theater. [It's been good theater](#), but it's unlikely to change the outcome. [*excerpt*]

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Education Policy | Elementary Education | Secondary Education

Comments

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And What If DeVos Is Confirmed?

By Dave Powell on February 7, 2017 9:02 AM |

So today is the big day: the Senate is expected to finally vote on Betsy DeVos's nomination to become the next U.S. Secretary of Education, and Vice President Mike Pence is poised to break an expected tie in her favor. I doubt very much that anything other than the expected result is going to happen. After all, we live in an age when too many [politicians pick their voters](#), not the other way around. My bet is that Collins and Murkowski were allowed to announce their votes against DeVos because the leadership had already conducted a tight whip count and felt confident that they had the votes to get DeVos through. Everything else has been theater. [It's been good theater](#), but it's unlikely to change the outcome.

Actually, it's been more than that. For some strange reason Democrats in the Senate have shown more bite when it comes to opposing DeVos and even have presented a unified front against her nomination. That's saying something for a party that has a big-tent mentality (which I, for one, don't think is a bad thing) and has shown an inability in the past to rally behind a coherent and easily articulated set of principles or goals. The unified opposition can't just be attributed to the fact that DeVos is such a terrible nominee, either; there are others, to be sure, with [limited qualifications](#), and others who have stumbled in their confirmation hearings.

The story you'll hear from aggrieved defenders of DeVos who are shocked—just shocked!—that she would be manhandled in this way is that Democrats are in the back pockets of the teachers unions, from whom they take their marching orders. They want you to believe that DeVos is a "mainstream" nominee with "mainstream" ideas about education that are finally being heard now that the fed-up public has been allowed to express its preferences by installing a president in the White House who lost by three million votes. These folks, when they're not trying to convince us that everybody is actually on their side, spend their time complaining about how they constantly have to push the boulder of common sense uphill because everyone is against them and education policy is "[so far left it can't see The Right](#)"—pun, I'm sure, very much intended.

Baloney. Look: if DeVos and her ideas about school choice were really as "mainstream" as we're being led to believe, more parents would have voted with their feet a long time ago. We've spent the better part of the last decade giving charter schools every advantage we could—legislative

help, financial help, fawning media coverage—yet the revolution we were promised hasn't happened. As of right now, [less than 6% of all American schoolchildren attend charter schools](#)—about 2.5 million kids. That means 42 million don't. No matter how you slice it, 6% is not "mainstream." It's marginal.

This doesn't mean that choice is an inherently bad idea; it just means that claims about the real lay of the land in education are wildly overexaggerated. And nothing about DeVos is mainstream, from her incredibly large bank account to her ideas about education. Actually, her crazy ideas about school choice go way beyond the notion of charter schools. She's a deregulator, a true believer in "The Market," someone who thinks accountability is a concept that only applies to people who don't agree with her. [She said it herself](#).

The truth is that the policy agenda has been tilted in favor of charters and choice for quite awhile now and all the choice advocates really have to show for it is control of a number of already troubled urban systems that have not exactly been turned around (maybe this isn't the solution then?) and tenuous control of a media narrative that portrays them as saviors of America's overlooked schoolchildren fighting the good fight against evil teachers unions and an education establishment that has all the advantages of entrenched power and uses them to thwart the efforts of America to deliver on its promise to young people.

In reality, many choice advocates are not really putting kids and parents first; they're putting ideology first. And they're not saviors at all—they're just people with a different idea about how education should be delivered who have not been nearly as successful at convincing parents of the turpitude of our public schools as they have been at convincing members of the media and political establishment of it. Do some charters work? Yes. Is the evidence convincing? Not really. Does it support the idea of doubling down on choice to "strengthen" public education? Hardly. That's one reason so many people are so concerned about DeVos' nomination. That, and relentless pressure from the grizzly bear lobby. I still believe that there is room for (public, non-profit, accountable) charter schools in the great big messy American education system. But just because people want to believe that they have the public behind them doesn't make it true.

At any rate, I'm duly impressed by the effort that went into trying to derail DeVos' nomination. In the end it appears that every Democrat in the Senate—even the wishy-washy ones who are never sure if they should advance the party's national agenda or try to peel one or two more "independent" voters from the Republicans back home—will vote against DeVos. That's no small feat. It suggests to me that maybe, just maybe, the Democrats may finally be ready to draw an important contrast between themselves and Republicans on this issue. The Democrats have been at least as sympathetic to the "bipartisan" neoliberal education agenda as Republicans have—maybe more so. Maybe they are starting to find a new voice.

To do that, there has to be a message, and to me the right message seems clear: for the past forty years Democrats have been complicit in the degradation of public institutions, if not in outright support of it. One of our political parties needs to explain again why public institutions matter. Name any major problem facing our country now—not just education but health care, foreign affairs, fake news, electoral fairness, any of them—and it's clear that a massive, coordinated public response is necessary. And long overdue. It is, after all, the one thing we haven't tried.

Deregulation and market solutions have simply not delivered the answers to public problems that we need. Nor have obfuscation and obstruction. What they've done, together, is make our problems worse by sowing doubts about the institutions we built and by offering half-baked solutions that often get "scaled up" before there is any evidence that they'll actually work. I can imagine a choice agenda working within a public framework, but that's not what DeVos (or her expected new boss) are offering. They say they're going to be disruptive and drain the swamp and give control of schools "back" to families but in fact this is a dangerous inversion of what their schemes will actually do: to protect the rights of kids in school we have to ensure that their rights are never compromised by privatization schemes and profit making ventures.

Our goal should be to give kids more choices when they leave school by ensuring that they have real chances for success while they are in school. The best way to do that is to hold the people that educate them to account, but to do it in a fair and reasonable way. That would be infinitely harder to do in a hybridized system that looks public on the outside but has all the trappings of a private system on the inside. Just offering another choice won't accomplish it—look around for proof. What will is a strong and active voice in the political arena that consistently speaks to the intrinsic power of public institutions to bring people together. Public schools especially.

There isn't much of a silver lining to hold on to if DeVos is confirmed—and maybe I'll even be wrong and we'll be surprised later today. But if she is, let's start with this: there is a chance here to hold those people who voted against her to their votes. Don't let their votes be registered as protests against a clearly unqualified nominee and then forgotten. Let's make them find a voice in support of public education. And then next time, when it's their turn to nominate somebody, let's make sure they nominate a person who knows how to do the job.