



1-22-2017

What If Betsy DeVos Is Not Confirmed?

Dave Powell
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/edfac>

 Part of the [Education Policy Commons](#), [Elementary Education Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Powell, Dave. "What If Betsy DeVos Is Not Confirmed?" Education Week (January 22, 2017).

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/edfac/38>

This open access opinion is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

What If Betsy DeVos Is Not Confirmed?

Abstract

After her disastrous turn in front of the Senate committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions last week, the odds of Betsy DeVos not being confirmed as secretary of education have to at least be a lot higher than they used to be. It seems like no stretch to say that she is no slam dunk, if she ever was. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Betsy DeVos, Secretary of Education, education policy

Disciplines

Education Policy | Elementary Education | Secondary Education

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](#).



What If Betsy DeVos Is Not Confirmed?

By Dave Powell on January 22, 2017 9:12 PM |

After her disastrous turn in front of the Senate committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions last week, the odds of Betsy DeVos not being confirmed as secretary of education have to at least be a lot higher than they used to be. It seems like no stretch to say that she is no slam dunk, if she ever was.

Now Lamar Alexander, the committee chair who has [done his best to grease the skids for DeVos](#), has announced that the vote on DeVos' confirmation will be delayed by a week. The reason Alexander gave for the delay made some sense—he said he [wanted to give the committee time to review DeVos' ethics paperwork](#), which was not finally available until the end of the week—but it's not hard to imagine that DeVos' poor performance in her confirmation hearing might have had something to do with it too. Had she proven herself to be even remotely qualified, in other words, it would have been much easier for Alexander to push her nomination right on through in spite of the ethics paperwork.

But she didn't, and now things are a little murkier. For starters, this ethics paperwork is genuinely troubling: DeVos has claimed at least [\\$580 million in assets](#) and has a tangle of connections to all kinds of different entities that at least raise questions about possible conflicts of interest (especially for a person who has been a vocal proponent of private, for-profit education), not to mention questions about what DeVos actually stands for. DeVos sits on all kinds of different boards and has given away millions of dollars to a variety of causes. Whatever DeVos believes—and I do think that she must show that she will support all children who attend public schools, no matter what their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other characteristics may be—the assets she declared are simply mind-boggling. It would take the average teacher making about \$45,000 a year over 11,000 years to make \$580 million. It seems reasonable to say that she lives on an entirely different planet than the one most teachers inhabit.

Of course being rich does not disqualify someone from public service, but it does make me wonder how well a person whose primary charge is to administer the provision of federal funds to ensure some semblance of equity in our nation's schools will embrace the work that needs to be done. And that leads me to my point: DeVos may well still be confirmed as secretary of education, in spite of the questions and in spite of her performance last week. But she does not appear to be well informed about the nature of the job and doesn't seem to be especially well

qualified to do it. And she was Trump's first choice for the job. What happens if he has to go to a backup plan?

Actually, as it happens, DeVos apparently was not Trump's first choice: it's been reported that [he asked Jerry Falwell, Jr.](#), the president of Liberty University, to take the job first. I'll let you be the judge of whether or not Falwell would have been a better choice than DeVos (let's just say [it's not grizzly bears he's afraid of](#)), but let me just say this: as bad as DeVos is, I could imagine a spurned Trump doing even worse. Someone is going to have this job, in all likelihood; if it's DeVos it won't be because she didn't profess a love for public education. And if it's somebody else it probably won't be because that person did.

I'm not suggesting that this means no one should stand in the way of DeVos' confirmation. Far from it. I hope teachers and others concerned about education policy will continue to make themselves heard as the vote on her confirmation looms next week. Keep tweeting. Keep posting wherever you post. Keep talking to other people, and keep writing and calling Congress. Do whatever it takes to keep the pressure on.

But then remember, if DeVos is somehow voted down, that Trump will just end up picking somebody else. Whether DeVos is confirmed or not, we will still have a president who said in his inaugural address that we have "an education system flush with cash but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge." That's all knowledge, folks; deprived of *all* knowledge. And flush with cash, too.

What Trump doesn't understand, of course, is that one reason we spend so much money on education in this country is because we distribute it inequitably (reinforcing the importance of having a competent secretary of education), and more importantly, because every single child who shows up to school is welcome to come inside, regardless of his ability to pay, regardless of where she came from, regardless of what adults might think of his or her ability to learn. To some people this generosity is a sign of weakness, something that holds us back and keeps us from being able to report the same test scores posted in some other countries.

To me, it's the thing that makes America's schools the most American thing about America, to borrow a phrase. Our schools do deliver quite a bit of knowledge to our children, not all of which is tested. They would do this even better if they were led by someone with the vision to see that public schools serve an invaluable civic function in a democracy. DeVos does not seem to share that vision and neither, for that matter, does Jerry Falwell. Both seem challenged by the idea that our Constitution requires the separation of church and state, just to cite one example, and neither seems to appreciate how important public schools are to the health of a democratic society.

Nor does Trump, whose scorn for our institutions of public life is well known and worn by him as a badge of honor. My hope is that Betsy DeVos will not be the next secretary of education; my fear is that even if she isn't many people will be satisfied with the fact that her candidacy was derailed and, once the spotlight has faded, will turn their attention to other things. We don't know who Trump might nominate if DeVos' nomination fails, but we can be pretty sure that supporters of public education will be disappointed again no matter who it is. If that's the case let's remember the effort that was put into educating our representatives in Congress and the public at

large about the damage DeVos could do to public education and redouble our efforts to make sure any future nominees who share those positions have their feet held to the fire too.