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## Abstract

Mitt Romney [said](#): "Betsy DeVos is a smart choice for education secretary." The *Wall Street Journal* [said](#) DeVos "knows how to fight and how to make the moral case for reform." Andrew Rotherham called her "a [pretty mainstream pick](#)." Rick Hess, purveyor of "straight talk" on education issues, [informs us](#) that DeVos is a "solid pick" who is "smart, thoughtful, and committed to doing what she thinks is best." It's too bad none of that was on display yesterday when DeVos in the hearing yesterday to determine if she should become the next U.S. Secretary of Education. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

Betsy DeVos, Secretary of Education, education policy

## Disciplines

Educational Leadership | Education Policy | Elementary Education | Secondary Education

## Comments

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## Betsy DeVos Fails the Test

By Dave Powell on January 18, 2017 3:14 PM |

Mitt Romney [said](#): "Betsy DeVos is a smart choice for education secretary." The *Wall Street Journal* [said](#) DeVos "knows how to fight and how to make the moral case for reform." Andrew Rotherham called her "[a pretty mainstream pick](#)." Rick Hess, purveyor of "straight talk" on education issues, [informs us](#) that DeVos is a "solid pick" who is "smart, thoughtful, and committed to doing what she thinks is best." It's too bad none of that was on display yesterday when DeVos in the hearing yesterday to determine if she should become the next U.S. Secretary of Education.

But before we get into it let's stay on Hess for a minute since he has also called DeVos "[a pretty conventional choice](#)" for education secretary, and has railed against the "unconscionable assault" she has had to endure since being nominated. Hess cites her work on behalf of a group called the Alliance for School Choice (which [apparently has a new name](#): "American Federation for Children" or "AFC Growth Fund"), and Jeb Bush's [Foundation for Excellence in Education](#), as well as her work as head of a political action committee called All Children Matter—which, as it happens, [owes millions in election fines](#)—to argue that DeVos is no different than any other nominee for education secretary has ever been. She sits on the boards of some foundations and pools contributions from people so they can be directed toward the causes that she supports—just like everyone always has. She hasn't been a teacher or anything, and neither she nor her children ever attended public schools, but, really, it's hard to imagine a more conventional choice for secretary of education. I mean, we sometimes forget that Horace Mann sharpened his chops on the Whig Super-PAC circuit after using his wife's fortune to encourage candidates to support the idea of common schools when all anyone ever wanted was local control.

Anyway, Hess believes DeVos just has not been given a fair chance by people determined to derail her confirmation before it even gets off the ground. [Hess says](#) he has a "big problem" with people who can't simply accept that there are differences of opinion about DeVos' fitness for the job, especially those who "feel compelled to cast her as a malicious force or launch vitriolic attacks based on where she sent her kids to school." Fair enough. In the end, maybe it doesn't matter where Betsy DeVos sent her kids to school. As I'm sure Hess would be quick to point out, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton didn't send their kids to public schools either. What's all the fuss?

So I'll give him that. Let's stick to the evidence. Do we have any evidence? Wouldn't it be great if nominees for important positions in the government—positions in which those nominees are expected to represent all Americans, not just the ones who voted for the current president—had an opportunity to stand before the public and answer important questions about key issues and clarify their positions on things? What if we could give Betsy DeVos the chance to stand before, say, a Senate committee and clear the air? Then all of the unfairness would surely melt away and she could show us, once and for all, how qualified she is.

As it happens, we *do* have a process just like that in our political system, and yesterday was Betsy DeVos' big day. In case you missed it, here's some of what we learned:

- **DeVos doesn't seem to understand how "accountability" works.** DeVos was asked by Sen. Tim Kaine to confirm whether or not she would insist on "equal accountability" in any educational program that receives taxpayer funding. Busted, DeVos simply repeated, like a Rubio-bot gone haywire: "I support accountability." What Kaine was driving at is the idea, fashionable in some circles, that it's okay for educational programs to accept federal money while also picking and choosing which ways they want to be responsible for spending it. Some, in fact, would convert at least a sizable chunk of federal education spending into personal vouchers that individuals could spend to attend any school regardless of that school's quality and regardless of whether or not the school breaks the law in one way or another—vouchers they could spend without accountability, in other words. So which is it? Because, see, applying the rules one way for people you like and another way for people you don't is not "accountability." It's favoritism. That leads us to another highlight...
- **DeVos has no idea what IDEA is—or, apparently, how our constitutional system works.** The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA) is a federal law that, in a nutshell, stipulates that everyone, including students with disabilities, is entitled to have equal access to educational services. It is a good example of what's both good and bad about federal involvement in education policy: the law protects the rights of individuals against those who would deny them their rights, but also challenges schools in ways that can be difficult to enforce. A semi-intelligent discussion of the law that advanced DeVos' apparent values might have focused on bureaucracy or "unfunded federal mandates" or something else along those lines. But DeVos apparently had no clue what IDEA is. Astonishingly, she said she believed states should be allowed to decide whether or not to enforce IDEA, [but we resolved that question a long time ago](#). When she realized her mistake DeVos said "Federal law must be followed where federal dollars are in play." Does it really need to be said that federal laws must be followed whether federal dollars are "in play" or not? I mean, really.
- **DeVos is aware of the grizzly scourge in Wyoming.** At least you can't say DeVos doesn't pay attention to the small policy details: when asked by Sen. Chris Murphy if guns should be allowed in schools DeVos hedged at first, then tried to pass the ball to Sen. Mike Enzi by noting that some schools in Enzi's home state fear attacks by grizzly bears and therefore might want to keep a gun handy. As ridiculous as this statement is—and I suspect it will live on in political lore—this is, of course, no laughing matter. Even Murphy seemed taken aback by DeVos' inability to give a human answer to the question. If we're in a place now where a person standing for nomination to run the U.S.

Department of Education cannot even definitively say that she's unequivocally opposed to the presence of guns in schools then we're even worse off than I thought.

- **DeVos couldn't answer the one common education question she was asked.** This was, of course, the big money moment, when Sen. Al Franken asked DeVos to share her position on the question of whether test scores should be used to measure student growth or proficiency. This is actually a fairly complicated issue, and I only call it "common" because I like to think you could ask any serious professional teacher for his or her opinion on it and get a thoughtful response. I also don't like the question all that much—how about a conversation about minimizing the use of test scores altogether and measuring growth in a more productive way?—but if DeVos couldn't handle this question I doubt she could have handled that one.\* She looked, for all intents and purposes, like a deer in the headlights. She looked, to borrow a phrase more popular at this moment, like the dog who caught the car: "I thought I could just spread my money around to support the causes I care about. Now I have to *know* something?"

There was more, but space prohibits me from sharing it all.

What it all adds up to, by any objective measure, is an embarrassing hearing that exposed just how profoundly unprepared DeVos is to do this job. This is not a hatchet job; I think it's a reasonable and defensible statement of fact based on the evidence DeVos herself provided. Turns out maybe being a billionaire philanthropist doesn't make a person a "conventional" choice for anything except billionaire philanthropy. In this case that seems to be the case, anyway. Billionaires: you should at least do your homework if you want to expand beyond those limitations.

What I saw from Betsy DeVos yesterday was the performance of a person who only has one answer to every question, and the answer is always the same no matter what the question is. In her case, the answer is "choice." Parents should have more choice. "Locales" should have more choice. Even states, apparently, should have a choice about whether or not to enforce federal laws. It's all choice, choice, choice. This might be a useful way to make sense of the world in rudimentary terms, but it's not the best way to go about answering complex questions in a job interview, and certainly isn't useful enough, on its own, to be a foundation for policymaking.

I heard Rick Hess on the radio this morning talking about this hearing and he said he didn't think DeVos had lost any votes yesterday—a statement that seems to say as much about the Republicans in Congress as it does about DeVos herself. She will probably be confirmed in spite of her embarrassing performance yesterday, leaving us with no choice but to batten down the hatches and redouble our efforts to ensure that her agenda continues to be questioned at every turn. But I wonder: does opposition to her nomination seem so unconscionable now?

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\* **NOTE:** In fairness to Franken, he did not explicitly couch his question in terms of using standardized tests to assess student growth or proficiency; he simply asked DeVos to comment on the question. She did not, to my eye, seem prepared to do that.