

POLICY BRIEF



Remarks by U.S. Education Secretary DeVos to the Washington Policy Center Annual Dinner

Hyatt Regency Hotel

Bellevue, Washington

October 13, 2017

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Introduction

The Board, staff and supporters of Washington Policy Center (WPC) were excited to host U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos at its 2017 Annual Dinner. Over 1,400 people attended, including over 300 WPC young professionals and college students.

The event was sold out and raised more than \$1 million in support of WPC's mission to expand family choice in education and to promote other effective reforms that improve the lives of all people in our state.

The event attracted unprecedented media coverage. Secretary DeVos' well-reasoned and eloquent appeal in support of school choice was widely reported on TV news, radio, print, online, and on social media. Every major news media outlet in the region sent representatives to cover the event.

Secretary DeVos' speech was enthusiastically received by dinner attendees and her speech was interrupted several times by applause. The audience was particularly affected by her touching portrayals of students whose lives have been uplifted by school choices programs.

Following is the full text of her remarks.



Remarks by U.S. Education Secretary DeVos

Thank you, Ami Lara, for that introduction and for what you do to advocate for our kids and their futures. And thank all of you for the work you do to improve the lives of Evergreen Staters.

You know, my job may be in a place that's called Washington, but please know that I prefer to be in this Washington. In fact, I was delighted to welcome one of your own into my family just a few years ago. A young man from Mukilteo married my daughter and he is the proud dad of one of my sweet granddaughters.

From Mukilteo to Spokane, your advocacy, your analysis, your activism – what keeps you going day in and day out – helps to improve opportunities for families in your state.

State-based centers like yours are important in shaping policy because you have great ideas and you fight for them. Your fellow member in the State Policy Network, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, has advanced major initiatives in my home state of Michigan.

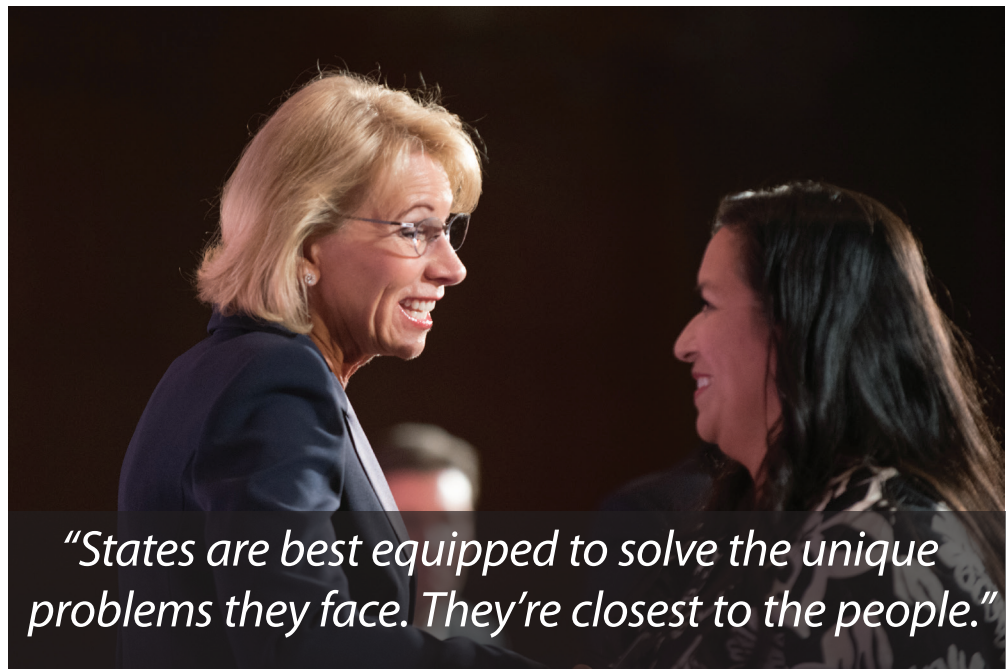
So it won't surprise you that I'm no stranger to state-based advocacy; it was a primary focus for 30 years before I entered public service. I've been engaged on a whole range of issues, including many you work on here in Washington. But one visit to a school in urban Grand Rapids sharpened my policy focus – and changed my life.

After my husband, Dick, and I acknowledged our philanthropy could only directly help a limited number of kids, we jumped into the policy arena with the goal of empowering as many students and parents as possible.

Perhaps many of you have a similar story—a defining moment that led to your desire to advocate for reform here in your home state.

Together, you in this room have led the way in challenging politicians in Olympia and helped them craft innovative solutions to today's problems: in healthcare, taxes, regulations, entitlements, and importantly, education.

“State-based centers like yours are important in shaping policy because you have great ideas and you fight for them.”



Sec. DeVos greets public school parent Ami Lara, who introduced DeVos at the event.

States have both a mandate and a responsibility to be the laboratories of democracy our Founders intended.

And, the reason the Founders -- and I suspect everyone in this room -- believed empowering states is because states are best equipped to solve the unique problems they face. They're closest to the people.

You and I know there are different challenges in Washington than in Maryland or Texas.

You're better able to understand your own circumstances than a central government in a distant capital.

States are also -- at least theoretically -- more nimble, more responsive and more likely to try a previously untested or unproven solution. One not yet dismissed by distant "experts."

These are only a couple of the reasons why I believe in a limited federal government, and it's why I believe in empowering parents.

Those closest to students are best equipped to serve them.

Parents know this. So, it shouldn't be a surprise school choice reforms are gaining momentum nationwide -- they are being driven by families and adopted by the states.

“Those closest to students are best equipped to serve them.”

I followed your fight for charter schools here in Washington, and I remember hearing about Austin. His mother only wanted better for him because the school he was assigned to attend -- based on his zipcode -- did not meet his needs. She enrolled him at Excel Public Charter School in Kent and it immediately launched him on a new, hopeful trajectory.

“He’s gone from being an angry, frustrated boy to a wonderful, responsible young man,” Austin’s mother told a local radio station.

Austin himself appreciated the personalized attention he got at Excel.

“It’s just fun,” he said. “Whenever you’re doing something, even if it’s not supposed to fun, when you’re doing a test, when you’re doing all these subjects, it’s not boring. You never get bored!”

I remember being bored in school, and too many kids are bored today.

I also think of Sandeep Thomas. Sandeep grew up impoverished in Bangalore, India and experienced terrible trauma in his youth. He was adopted by a loving couple from New Jersey, but continued to suffer from the unspeakable horrors he witnessed in his early years. He was not able to focus in school, and it took him hours to complete even the simplest assignment.

This changed when his family moved to Washington, where Sandeep was able to enroll in a virtual public school. This option gave him the flexibility to learn in the quiet of his own home and pursue his learning at a pace that was right for him. He ended up graduating high school with a 3.7 GPA, along with having earned well over a year of college credit. Today, he’s working in finance and he is a vocal advocate for expanding options that allow students like him a chance to succeed.

Austin, Sandeep and others like them—that’s why I’m in this fight. And, I imagine, that’s why you’re in this fight. There are still

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too many kids—way too many kids—who are trapped in a school that doesn’t meet their needs.

There are too many parents who are denied the fundamental right to decide the best way to educate their child.

And there are many inside -- and outside -- our current system who insist it is a government system that is best equipped to educate children.

In fact, not too long ago, the American Federation of Teachers tweeted at me.

The union wrote “Betsy DeVos says public should invest in individual students. NO we should invest in a system of great public schools for all kids.”

The union bosses made it clear: they care more about a system -- one that was created in the 1800s -- than they do about students. Their focus is on school buildings instead of school kids. Isn’t education supposed to be all about kids?

Education is an investment in individual students, and that’s why funding and focus should follow the student, not the other way around.

But the definitions we have traditionally used when describing public education have become tools that divide us.

Isn’t “the public” made up of students and parents? Isn’t “public money” really their money -- the taxpayer’s money?

And doesn’t every school aim to serve the public good? Any school that prepares its students to lead successful lives is a benefit to all of us.

“The union bosses made it clear: they care more about a system than they do about students.”

“Any school that prepares its students to lead successful lives is a benefit to all of us.”

The definition of public education should be this: to educate the public. That’s why we should fight less about the word that comes before “school,” and fight for the students a school serves.

Think about food. Yes, food.

Like education, we all need food to grow and thrive. But we don’t all want or need the exact same thing at the exact same time. What tastes good to me may not taste good to you. What’s working for me right now might not work for me some years from now.

And so, we choose how to get the food that best meets our unique needs.

Now think about how you eat. You could visit a grocery store, or a convenience store, or Pike Place to buy food and cook at home. Or you could visit a restaurant of which there are many types—fine dining, fast food or something in between.

Near the Department of Education, there aren’t many restaurants. But you know what? Food trucks started lining the streets to provide options. Some are better than others; and some are even local restaurants that have added trucks to their businesses to better meet customer’s needs.

Now, if you visit one of those food trucks instead of a restaurant, do you hate restaurants? Or are you trying to put grocery stores out of business?

No. You are simply making the right choice for you based on your individual needs at that time.

Just as in how you eat, education is not an “either, or” decision. Being for equal access and opportunity is not being against anything.

I’m not for or against one type or one brand of school choice. I’m not for any type of school over another.

“Now, if you visit one of those food trucks instead of a restaurant, do you hate restaurants?”

Sycophants of the “system” would have you believe school choice means vouchers, right? And charter schools.

They say it means private schools, or maybe even religious schools. It means for-profit schools. They say it means taking money away from public schools -- no accountability, no standards, the wild west, the market run amuck.

Well, I’ve got to give it to them; they’ve done a mighty fine job setting the scene for that house of horrors in the press.

They did so by trying to paint an indelible line, forcing a false dichotomy: if you support giving parents any option—any say—you must therefore be diametrically opposed to public schools, public school teachers and public school students.

Yet nothing could be further from the truth!

You see, choice is not just another wonky policy debate or a pedagogical theory or a statute written by politicians to be parsed out by lawyers.

The real meaning of choice is that it is every parent’s right to determine how to engage their children in their own life-long learning journey.

States are different, families are dynamic and children are unique.

What choice looks like for one family in here in Washington will be different from what a family in Oregon decides.

“The real meaning of choice is that it is every parent’s right to determine how to engage their children in their own life-long learning journey.”

“We can assist states who are working to further empower parents, and we can urge those who haven’t to start.”

In fact, what choice looks like for one child may be different than what it looks like for his or her own sibling!

That’s why I wholeheartedly believe real choice cannot be accomplished through a one-size-fits-all federal government mandate!

That might sound counterintuitive to some, coming from the U.S. Secretary of Education, but after eight months in D.C. – and three decades working in states – I know if Congress tries to mandate “choice,” all we’ll end up with is a mountain of mediocrity, a surge of spending and a bloat of bureaucracy to go along with it.

But D.C. does have an important supporting role to play in the future of choice.

We can amplify the voices of those who only want better for their kids. We can assist states who are working to further empower parents, and we can urge those who haven’t to start.

Today, 26 states and the District of Columbia offer more than 50 different private school choice programs. And while there are similarities, no two are the same. Different states, different needs, different students, different solutions.

Choice is on the march, even in places many thought impossible. A recent statewide survey in California conducted by UC Berkeley – yes, that’s right, Berkeley – found a majority of Californians favor private school choice for low-income families. That majority blurred party lines, also. These Californians know better than many in D.C. – our children’s futures should not be a partisan issue.

And some of you may have read about the recent victory for families and school choice in Illinois. Yes, Illinois! If it can be done in Illinois, it can be done here.

“Too many politicians, celebrities, and other elites say ‘Choice for me, but not for thee.’ Let’s end the hypocrisy and, quite frankly, the injustice”

Yet, there are too many politicians, celebrities, and other elites who say, “no”. What students and parents currently have is good enough. Then, those same politicians and celebrities turn around and write big checks to send their own children to prestigious private schools.

Choice for me, but not for thee.

Let’s end the hypocrisy and, quite frankly, the injustice.

Roll up your sleeves and continue to fight for change. Because it can happen here. Because Washington families want it to happen here.

Washington’s charter schools and its “Running Start” dual-enrollment program have benefited some students, but there many others who need more options and more opportunities.

Recently, I toured the heartland of our country to visit the teachers, parents and students who are shaping their own futures. We called it the “Rethink School Tour” because I wanted to highlight, and learn from innovative educators who are breaking free of the standard mold to better meet the needs of their students.

Traditional public schools, charter public schools, independent private schools, parochial schools, homeschools – even a high school at a zoo!

They were all different, all with unique approaches. But what they all had in common was a deliberate focus on serving their students -- and students and parents chose them.

There was another common characteristic these very diverse schools shared: they all embraced doing right by their students without any politician’s “permission slip” to do so, or more importantly, without anyone in D.C. telling them “no.”

“There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Individual solutions will be found in states and local communities, led by families.”

Many in D.C., over the course of many years, have claimed the mantle of “education expert.”

They’ve peddled a panacea for what ails America’s schools. But, the truth is, there isn’t a “cure all”.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Individual solutions will be found in states and local communities, led by families. It will be a whole menu of options.

Families already make choices with their children when it comes to their next steps for education after high school.

They compare options, and make an informed decision.

If you choose to go to Gonzaga, are you somehow against the Huskies or the Cougs? Well, you’re not -- except when they’re on the basketball court.

If you decide to go to Seattle University, are you somehow against public universities?

No one seems to criticize those choices. No one thinks choice in higher education is wrong. So why is it wrong in elementary school, middle school, or high school?

Instead of dividing the public when it comes to education, the focus should be on the ends, not the means.

Adults should stop fighting over students, and start fighting for students.

Time and time again, studies have shown more options yield better results, for all students.

The Urban Institute recently looked at Florida’s Tax Credit Scholarship Program, one that provides low-income parents the opportunity to send their students to the school of their choice.

“No one thinks choice in higher education is wrong. So why is it wrong in elementary school, middle school, or high school?”

Florida’s program was one of the first in the nation and today serves more than 100,000 students across the state.

While previous studies have shown increased achievement for scholarship recipients, this study also found a significantly increased college attendance rate. Further, this study demonstrated the longer a student participated in the choice program, the better their long-term educational outcomes.

The data are encouraging, but I didn’t need another research paper to know the program works.

I’ve seen living proof. Some of you may have heard me or President Trump share Denisha’s story. But I think it’s best if she tells you herself.

Who can argue with Denisha’s story? Who can dare to look her in the eye and tell her she didn’t deserve a choice?

Denisha is living proof that choice works.

Every American student deserves the options she had. Every American student deserves to be excited about learning.

That’s what we are working towards each and every day. That’s why we’re committed to rethinking school.

We must challenge all schools to do better. Because even the best school in America needs to continue to improve.

Over the last two days, I’ve seen inspiring examples of schools working to do just that—unafraid to challenge the status quo and to try something different for their students.

“Adults should stop fighting over students, and start fighting for students.”

“Individualized learning recognizes that no student is the same, and that each child learns in their own way.”

Just yesterday, I visited a traditional middle school near San Jose, California, where they’ve implemented an individualized learning platform in their classrooms.

Students are able to learn and advance at their own pace. Those who need additional time on a particular subject get it. Those who are ready to move on, can.

Individualized learning recognizes that no student is the same, and that each child learns in their own way.

When we are focused on the needs of each child, success can then be measured by what they are learning and mastering, not by how long they sit at their desks.

I fully recognize that I—we—represent change. And, change can be scary—particularly for staunch defenders of the current system.

But, what has the current system yielded? Average results for America’s students when compared to their peers around the world.

Middle. Average. Those aren’t words with which I’m comfortable describing America. It’s not the future we should feel comfortable offering anyone.

That’s why we must not be distracted by those who are afraid of change.

We owe it to our children to be fearless.

We owe it to them to be undeterred by the loud voices who say education in America is “good enough” and by those who shout that we should “leave the system alone”.

We owe it to America’s students to rethink school because they deserve a better education and a chance at a better life.

America is too great a country to deny any parent any option and it is too great to deny any student an equal opportunity to pursue a great education.

Let's continue to fight for students like Austin, and Sandeep and Denisha.

The rising generation represents 100 percent of our future; they deserve 100 percent of our effort.

Thank you, God bless you, and God bless our future—America's students.



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Published by Washington Policy Center

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