

DeVos' disqualifying record

Randi Weingarten, President
American Federation of Teachers

One year ago, Congress—urged on by parents and educators—reached a cease-fire in the education wars. After No Child Left Behind and the fixation on testing instead of on children, Republicans and Democrats—from rural, urban and suburban communities—agreed on a fresh start for public education with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). What a difference a year makes. This week, the Senate will consider the nomination of Donald Trump's choice for secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, someone who has spent decades—and millions of dollars—to divide communities and defund, undermine and privatize public schools.

Americans want to strengthen the public schools that 90 percent of American children attend.

DeVos lobbied for a school voucher law that voters in her home state of Michigan overwhelmingly rejected. But she was able to push through the vast expansion of for-profit charter schools with little oversight. DeVos has written so many checks (including to several senators who will vote on her nomination) and strong-armed so many lawmakers that, despite having no experience in public education, she has influenced nearly every aspect of education in Michigan. The result? Achievement has declined across the state. In addition to media reports of rampant corruption, nearly half of Michigan's charter schools rank in the bottom of America's schools, and charters lag 84 percent behind state averages in math and 80 percent in reading.

Americans want the secretary of education to strengthen and support the public schools that 90 percent of American children attend. In a speech last week at the National Press Club, I outlined four pillars that do just that—and help ensure every neighborhood public school is a viable choice for parents. The pillars focus on children's well-being, powerful learning, teacher capacity and collaboration.

Promoting Children's Well-Being

Education starts with meeting children where they are—emotionally, socially, physically and academically. We must confront the reality that half of all public school students live in poverty. One way to help these students is through community schools—neighborhood public schools that

meet kids' needs by coordinating partners and resources. New York City's Community Health Academy of the Heights is a great example. CHAH offers supports like mental health counseling, a parent resource center, a food pantry and a community health clinic. A variety of indicators, including large gains in academic achievement, attest to the academy's effectiveness.

Supporting Powerful Learning

Society rightly sets high expectations for our public schools—to develop students academically, for work and civic life, and to lead fulfilling lives. The path to accomplishing these goals lies in powerful learning—learning that engages students and encourages them to question and collaborate. Like the New York City students who conducted a mock trial of a participant in the Rwanda genocide; and the students in Corpus Christi, Texas, who investigated the potential for humans to live on other planets. Career and technical education can also deeply engage students and help them to develop skills and knowledge they can use in the world of work.

Building Teacher Capacity

Becoming an accomplished teacher takes time, support and an intentional focus, such as teacher residency programs that pair prospective teachers with accomplished educators, and opportunities for new and veteran teachers to share their expertise with colleagues. Teacher evaluation can also build capacity, and the AFT has fought for evalu-

ation systems that support both teacher growth and student learning.

Fostering School and Community Collaboration

The quiet successes that result from educators, parents and community partners working together are the glue that holds all this together. Collaboration is essential—schools with parents, educators with administrators, and schools with community partners. When schools struggle, the response too often is “disruption”—mass firings, school closures, and district or state takeovers. Those approaches are indeed disruptive, but they are not effective.

The Path Forward

These four pillars are in every K-12 public school that works. ESSA creates the potential to put them in place, but it doesn't guarantee it.

If the Senate considers Betsy DeVos through the same lens as it did ESSA, then senators will reject her nomination. Everything we know about her—her lack of experience with public schools, her antipathy to LGBTQ students, her evangelism for privatization regardless of results, and her zeal to undermine and pauperize public education—disqualifies her from holding the position she seeks. Regardless of what the Senate does, thousands of people in hundreds of communities will take action on Jan. 19—and, indeed, every day—for the public schools all children deserve. That should be everyone's goal, particularly anyone who seeks responsibility for our children's future.



Weingarten speaks at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 9.

Pam Wolfe

FOLLOW AFT PRESIDENT RANDI WEINGARTEN: twitter.com/rweingarten