

What DeVos Might Do to Public Schools

Donald Trump is stocking his administration with fellow rich people including “school voucher” advocate Betsy DeVos as Education Secretary, a choice that makes many public school defenders nervous, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

With only days to go before Donald Trump is sworn in as President and with his Cabinet choices now undergoing confirmation, a major area of concern is what impact billionaire Betsy DeVos will have as Education Secretary. She is an outspoken supporter of school vouchers and thus seen by many educators as a threat to public schools.

I spoke to Dr. Kevin Kumashiro about DeVos and her commitment to dismantling the public education system in favor of school vouchers and so-called “school choice.”

Dr. Kumashiro is the Dean of the University of San Francisco, School of Education, and author of *Bad Teacher: How Blaming Teachers Distorts the Bigger Picture*. He recently said about DeVos’s qualifications for the job: “De Vos has not taught or worked in public schools, or been a parent of public school children or earned experience or expertise as a leader, scholar or teacher in the public school system”.

Dennis Bernstein: So, that’s a bit stark, Dr. Kumashiro. Can you say something about what [Betsy DeVos’s] qualifications are and what her educational background is that would qualify, or justify, her appointment as a Secretary of Education?

Dr. Kevin Kumashiro: I think a lot of people are surprised by her choice by Trump as the next nominee for the Secretary of Education. And I think he’s turning to someone who has worked for many years in the education field, not in working within public schools, but as an advocate or even a board member of organizations that are pushing for certain kinds of school reforms, and school policy changes.

So, she, for example, has led a lot of efforts to charterize school districts, school systems in Michigan. She has pushed for changes in policies that would actually take away accountability and oversight for charter schools. She has pushed for voucher programs.

And I think what’s clear is that this charterizing and privatizing of public school has been a centerpiece of her agenda. And, we should, therefore, not be surprised that it would be the policy that she would bring, nation-wide, if she

were to become the next Secretary of Education.

And let me just throw in one other point, which is Trump, while he was campaigning, was actually calling to deregulate and privatize public schools. And a specific pledge he made was to divert \$20 billion, which is nearly 30% of the federal education budget, to expand school choice. So, in that sense, she is very much in alignment with the kind of changes that Trump has been calling for. And what we would, therefore, expect to see if she is confirmed as the next secretary.

DB: And ... when you say charterize, what do you mean?

KK: Well, what I mean by charterizing a school system is to open the doors for the formation of many charter schools that can replace the neighborhood public school. So, it's moving a school system from a neighborhood school model to a charter school model.

And charterizing is not just swinging the doors open by making this an option. Charterizing a school system also means putting in the supports and the systemic changes necessary to support those kinds of changes.

So, diverting of public funds, the streamlining of approval processes, and the removal of regulations and oversight over charter schools. All of these things are levers that can fuel the charterization, in other words, fuel the movement to... the proliferation of, charter schools in any school system. And this is exactly the kind of thing that DeVos has been championing, and, therefore, what we should expect what would be spreading, nationally.

And I think why this is of so much concern to many of us is because charter schools, as a lever for change, is not proven by the mountains of research that we have. There's no compelling body of research that says that moving a school system into a charter system is actually going to make things better.

There's lots of people who want to say, "There's great charter schools out there." And I agree, there are great charter schools out there. Just as there are bad ones. Just like we can say there are great neighborhood public schools. And there are ones that are struggling.

The question isn't, "Are there some charter schools that are great?" The question is, "If you charterize a system, is that going to make things better? If you fuel ... the deregulation, the privatization, the lack of oversight, the different kind of standards for the different kinds of school, does that, actually, fuel improvement?"

And the reality is that, even though there are some great performing charter

schools, overall we are not seeing school systems improve by gains in achievement, gains in attainment, anything like that. There is not a systemic improvement that we see with the movement towards charter schools and expanded school choice.

And this is why we should be concerned. If we're going to put a massive amount of resources and attention into a school reform initiative there should be the research that backs up that kind of a change. And with charter schools and school choice, there isn't that compelling body of research.

DB: And [Devos] is a billionaire heir ... a supporter of voucher schools. Where has she rolled up her sleeves, what can we say in terms of marking her own history of events, sort of a strong support, in a general sense, for these charter schools? And we often hear that the schools are failing, the people who are being let down the most are the poor people, are the people of color. What's her experience at this level?

KK: It's such a great question, I hope many more people ask, which is, what's the bigger picture of the advocacy and leadership [that] Betsy DeVos has demonstrated over the past years and decades?

So, let me point to just a few things. [...]

One, is what she's perhaps most known for, is being a top leader of the Michigan Republican Party. She is the former chair of the Michigan Republican Party. She is a top donor nationally to the Republican Party. But she's also the board chair of the National Philanthropy Roundtable... The group that brings together what we might argue is the wealthiest 1%, or 0.1%, in the nation.

The Philanthropy Roundtable formed four decades ago, really to advance the interests of the corporate elite, in response to the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. And so, in both of these instances – leadership in the Republican Party, leadership in the Philanthropy Roundtable – her work has focused on...privatization, on moving forward a corporate agenda in the public sphere, and that includes in education.

Some of the education groups that we can then look at... she's a board member of Jeb Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education. She's a board member of... or she actually chaired the American Federation for Children. ... And, actually, if you go to her web site... She lists the different organizations that she is on.

When I've written about Betsy DeVos and some of our larger concerns, some of the things that I try to argue is that the Secretary of Education is the top leader nationally for public education. A system that should be serving all of America's children and youth.

We need a leader who will advocate for the success, the dignity, the human rights of every single child, particularly those from struggling groups. And so, we need to then look at the organizations that she is connected to, that she is leading, that she is funding, to see where do they stand on policies related to struggling communities?

For example, one of the organizations that she has funded, and served on the board for, the Acton Institute, has actually called for the loosening of child labor laws. She and her husband have funded and led successful efforts to ban same-sex marriage in Michigan, and elsewhere. She has called for the diverting of public tax dollars to expand Christian Fundamentalist education.

And then, of course, I mentioned the American Federation for Children, this is a group that works very closely with the American Legislative Exchange Council [ALEC] which not only funnels kind of dark money into campaigns but also creates model state legislation that advances corporate interests, and was formed specifically to roll back gains of the Civil Rights Movement.

In all of these instances that I just mentioned, these are very concrete examples of the types of initiatives that she has been deeply involved in, either through her funding or through her leadership, that really speaks against the kinds of leadership we need at a national level regarding issues of our diverse student populations, and issues of inequity, that plague our struggling communities. So this, to me, is the bigger picture of what we should be looking for, why we should be skeptical, and why we should be acting to raise these questions in the confirmation process.

DB: Now ... you mentioned that she's from Michigan. The Michigan Public School System is in disarray. I'm wondering... has she taken an interest in that system? What has she done to try and mitigate the suffering that has come out of ... really essentially a lack of funding, particularly in poor communities? Has she used her multi-billion dollar background to step in in any way, to improve things in her own state?

KK: You know, she has been very involved in her home state. She is credited with leading the charge to promote school choice and charter schools, and to deregulate charter schools, which means to lift a lot of policies and laws that are all about oversight, accountability, assessment and so on, of the charter schools and how they're performing.

So ... here is the test case, right?... It's sort of like Arne Duncan [Secretary of Education 2009 – 2015] and Chicago. We actually have a test case that we should have been paying more attention to in the confirmation process. We could have seen exactly what was happening, where it was failing, in the Chicago school

system before Arne Duncan took his policies nationally, the same with Betsy DeVos. We should look at what is happening in Michigan.

So, what is happening? As we see the spread of charter schools, the spread of school choice and the deregulation of charter schools, what we're actually seeing is Michigan schools are struggling more.

There's a lot of [examples]... if any of your listeners can Google what's happening with Michigan schools and the influence of Betsy DeVos to see that, again, in contrast to all the rhetoric around how school choice will close the achievement gap, will raise standards, will diversify our neighborhood schools, will increase parental involvement, because parents have to be involved in choosing which schools their kids go to.

In all of these ways, where is the evidence that it's actually leading to improvement? What we're actually seeing is that the achievement gap, as in many other urban areas, is continuing to widen. This is happening nationally, but particularly in places like Michigan.

And, what we're also seeing, is that against the backdrop of calling for increased ... privatization and competition, is the call to basically dis-invest publicly in public schools. In other words, for many states and for many school systems, the rationale that so-called reformers often use to actually put less funding in education, is to say, "No, actually we don't need more money, we just need to more effectively and efficiently use the money we already have." So let's get rid of monopolies, let's get rid of too much investment in the public sector, let's fuel privatization, let's fuel competition, because it's the competition that will make people try harder, and work better.

This is the whole basis for the school choice movement, this is the rhetoric that's being used. It's the rhetoric that's being used with charter schools. It's the rhetoric that's being used with alternative routes for teacher certification. It's all based on the idea that competition and privatization will actually fuel improvements and, therefore, we don't need to increase our investment.

And this is where the research bumps up against the rhetoric, because the research is actually really quite clear, that where we simply deregulate and privatize, and where we simply assume that competition is going to make things better, we see the exact opposite. We see that the struggling schools get even greater disinvestment, and, not surprisingly, see even greater struggle, see even [more] widening and even bigger widening of the gap.

This, I think, is DeVos' legacy in Michigan and I hope that this is what's

talked about when we consider her to be the next Secretary of Education.

DB: Dr. Kumashiro, I'm a former teacher. I spent several years teaching in the South Bronx, and at the worst time. I spent many an hour, many a late night hour, preparing my own textbooks, because there was nothing there to teach the kids.

People such as Betsy DeVos like to blame the teachers, and like to blame the public school system for hiring lazy teachers. We saw that in Chicago with the trying to blame the teachers who took a very noble stand in support of kids in terms of opposing the closure of key schools in the poorest areas of that community. She's a part of that – "blame the teacher." So, the schools are bad. I've seen some pretty terrible schools. I've seen some incredible disrespect of kids, of the parents. So, how do you come to that?

KK: I think recognizing that there are voices in this debate that like to scapegoat teachers is an important starting point. Because when we scapegoat, when we blame teachers for everything we think is going wrong with public education, we actually are individualizing the problem. And we're not looking at the bigger picture.

We're not looking at how education is a system that needs to work collectively. It's sort of like the idea of – it takes a village to raise a child. It absolutely takes a whole system or village working together. And one great teacher ... just is not going to be the magic bullet. Just like firing the bad ones is not going to solve all of our problems either.

Yes, there are teachers that probably shouldn't be teaching. And there are schools that probably need to be completely, you know, revamped. But tackling the individual school or teacher actually misses the much bigger problem.

What we actually need to be thinking about is, "What is the system that needs to be working together in a well oiled, kind of, machine, to be able to really effectively teach our children?"

Within the schools, for example, there's all sorts of things that have to be working together: the teachers, the aides, the health care workers, the counselors, the librarians. And then outside of the school we have: the curriculum producers, we have professions, we have community organizations, we have neighborhood organizations. And all of these things need to be working together in order for a child to learn, and to thrive and to grow.

So, to me, the question ... should not only be, "How do we determine whether or not this individual teacher or this individual school is performing well, and then what should be the punishment, or the reward?" That ... should definitely not

be the main question we should be asking.

What we should be asking is, "What does the research say it takes for the system, or the village, to come together to effectively teach each and every child? And how do we strengthen each element of that system, to be able to work collectively, together?" That, to me, is what a vision for public education needs to start with.

And I'm hopeful that as we gain more awareness of these so-called reforms that tackle only one small piece of the puzzle, I'm hoping that that forces us as a nation to look much more broadly at the bigger picture and to refuse to buy into simplistic stories of the problem.

DB: Education writer Jonathan Kozol wrote two books. His first book was *Death at an Early Age*, which documented the lack of resources and the way in which the public school systems have been left to ruin. And then he wrote a very important book called *Savage Inequality*, in which he really confronted a key problem of public schools, which is the nature of funding.

I remember... I was a substitute for a while in New York City. And you could substitute on the East Side of Manhattan, say at 86th Street, and you walk into a school that has guidance counselors, and a library full of books, and real physical ed teachers. You go up 25 blocks to East Harlem and there's no librarian and gym is the teacher gets a basketball and you throw it out to the gym. Guidance counselors? College bound kids? There was nothing there. So, there is a real problem in the nature of the way we have come to think about schools, and to fund them. Right?

KK: Oh, yeah.... And I so appreciate that you bring up Jonathan Kozol's great work that shows disparities in funding. Absolutely. We, as a nation, should be embarrassed that we've created a school system where those who have resources and privileges have the best education we have to offer, and the masses get a paltry education.

In so many ways, we've created a school system that sorts students, and that reinforces, kind of, their circumstances of birth, whether they come in with privileges or with great disadvantage.

And, this is, I think, why creating a school system that is all about a competition is such a problematic framework for thinking about public education. Because a competition requires that there be winners and losers. And we should be asking ourselves... Why are we creating a system where we're expecting some of our kids to lose and to fall through the cracks?

You know, one of my colleagues likes to remind me that when Thomas Jefferson was

talking about a public school system, his vision was that every child should be able to walk to their neighborhood public school, and get the very best that our nation has to offer.

And I think that's a much more exciting vision for public education than to say, "Let's throw these schools into a competition, and some are going to be great, and therefore some kids are going to get a really great education, but never mind, we're going to give up on the others." No, we need to insist that every school is at its finest.

And that, to me, is what a democratic public school system looks like. It's not one that is dependent on your circumstances of birth. It is not one that sorts kids. It is one that pushes against social inequities. It is one that insists that a strong nation, a strong democracy, is one where every child can benefit from the very best that our nation has to offer. And that, to me, is a vision worth struggling for.

DB: ... Maybe you can expand a little bit... What is at stake if we lose our public education system? What do we lose?

KK: I think this is the moment to ask that question... We know since ... 1979 – that's when the Department of Education was created as a stand alone federal department – and in the decades since, the Republican Party has (and others, not just the Republican Party) has been saying, "Why do we need a federal Department of Education? Why don't we just sort of let everything run on its own, let states control it, or even better yet, privatize the whole system?"

So, why I think it's worth struggling for public education to be a central core investment of the nation is because I really believe that education is where we struggle as a nation to define who we are, and who our next generation will become. It is where we grapple with our own identity, with the promises of our next generation, and with our aspirations for growth.

If we allow the school system to be, really, to be almost like a prize, where those who have the greatest resources can get the best, we're creating a school system that fuels the spread, the maintenance, the growth of inequities, rather than a school system that is all about liberation, freedom, justice, you know, a school system that builds the very core of the democratic values that we claim to hold so dear in this nation. That is what I think is at stake.

That is why this moment is so important. And, yes, one Secretary [of Education] can make a big difference positively or negatively. But I think it's important for us to remember that regardless of who is in a leadership role, there needs to be a movement around that leader, to push them in the right direction.

All the presidents who held office in our nation at a time of great social transformation like Lincoln, like Franklin Roosevelt, like Lyndon Johnson – even, sort of, Ronald Reagan – they were [in power] at times of huge social transformation. And all of those presidents I named, there were very different transformations happening in their time.

But what tied them all together is that ... they were not acting alone. They were at these very powerful social movements that were pushing them, working alongside them, working behind them. And that is what we need to be telling ourselves.

Whether we are supporting the next secretary or challenging and holding them accountable, there needs to be the public pushing for education as a public good. That to me what is at stake. That is the role that we all need to be involved in. I look forward to the challenge.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
