

A photograph of Betsy DeVos, a woman with short blonde hair and glasses, wearing a purple blazer. She is seated at a wooden desk with a microphone in front of her, looking slightly to her right. The background is a wood-paneled room, likely a hearing room. The text "BETSY DEVOS, THE (RELATIVELY" is overlaid in large white capital letters across the middle of the image.

BETSY DEVOS, THE (RELATIVELY

Betsy DeVos testifies on Capitol Hill on January 17, 2017, at her confirmation hearing before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.



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REFORMER

feature

A LONG RECORD REFUTES THE RADICAL IMAGE OF THE EDUCATION SECRETARY

A PRIVATIZATION EXTREMIST. A religious zealot. A culture warrior. Our new Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, was painted as any or all of these things in the fevered weeks between the 2016 presidential election and her confirmation hearing. In the days following that hearing, tens of thousands of people flooded the lines of congressional offices, numerous petitions with hundreds of thousands of signatures were circulated, and social media was set ablaze. The outcry culminated in a historic Senate confirmation vote for DeVos, with Vice President Mike Pence stepping in to break a 50-50 tie.

In stark contrast to this tumultuous series of events, a careful look at DeVos's record in Michigan and around the country, where she has spent decades as an advocate for children, philanthropist, and political power broker, reveals a fairly traditional, center-right

PHOTOGRAPH / ASSOCIATED PRESS; CAROL YN KASTER

by MICHAEL Q. McSHANE

education reformer. DeVos has a long history of supporting the kinds of accountability and school-choice policies that a broad swath of the education-reform community has championed over the last two decades.

Still, skepticism looms. She has accepted an invitation to serve under a decidedly nontraditional president, causing a fair amount of cognitive dissonance in the education commentariat. Is there something sinister lurking behind her decision to join the Trump administration? Is she really a wolf in sheep's clothing?

In a series of interviews, DeVos's contemporaries describe her as someone who believes deeply in the power of education to improve people's lives, and who is committed to expanding reforms that will improve it. DeVos has referred questions to the Trump transition team throughout the nomination process, but a thorough review of her considerable record and history of public statements makes her intentions clear.

"More and more parents are coming to realize their children are suffering at the hands of a system built to strangle any reform, any innovation, or any change," she told an audience at the American Federation for Children last May. "This realization is becoming more evident as the momentum builds for an education revolution."

The question isn't what DeVos hopes to do if confirmed as education secretary—spoiler alert: it's expanding access to high-quality educational opportunities for all, not dismantling public education—but whether she will be able to do it.

both as a donor and Republican Party leader. She is a former local precinct delegate and Michigan Republican National Committeewoman, and was twice elected Michigan Republican Party chair. She is described as a talented fundraiser, and is credited with personally raising \$150,000 for former President George W. Bush's reelection campaign in 2004. Her husband ran for Michigan governor as the GOP candidate in 2006. The extended DeVos family is estimated to have donated at least \$17 million to political candidates and committees since 1989, with at least \$10 million of that donated since 2014, according to local media reports.

DeVos, along with other members of the Prince and DeVos families, also has engaged in robust charitable giving over the past several decades, predominantly funding influential conservative organizations. A compilation the DeVos family provided to *Forbes* totaled \$1.33 billion in lifetime donations as of 2015, representing one-quarter of their current net worth and making them the 24th-most-generous philanthropic family in the United States. That includes giving through the Dick and Betsy DeVos Family Foundation, which the couple chair and which has a five-point focus: the local community, education, the arts, justice, and leadership. In addition to arts and education institutions, the foundation has also supported various policy organizations, including the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where I am an adjunct fellow (an unpaid position). DeVos serves on the AEI board, and the family foundation donated \$750,000 to AEI in 2015, with a commitment for \$1 million more.

In Louisiana in 2012, the American Federation for Children, which DeVos led as chairwoman

A "Faithful Steward"

The broad contours of DeVos's life story are relatively well known. The daughter of the wealthy Prince family, she grew up in Holland, Michigan, on the outskirts of Grand Rapids, and was raised in the Calvinist Christian Reformed Church. Her father, Edgar Prince, founded the successful auto-parts manufacturer Prince Corporation, and her brother Erik Prince, a Navy SEAL, founded the Blackwater security firm now known as Academi. She graduated from a private Christian high school, earned a bachelor's degree at Calvin College, and married Richard "Dick" DeVos Jr., the son of a co-founder of the Amway Corporation and the company's former president. In one widely cited estimate by *Forbes*, the Amway fortune they stand to inherit totals \$5.1 billion. Together, they chair the Windquest Group, a technology-focused investment management firm. In 2010, they founded a local charter school, the West Michigan Aviation Academy.

DeVos has been politically active since her college days,

As with the extended DeVos family, the couple is openly influenced by their faith; their foundation's mission statement references their intention to be faithful stewards as they engage in charitable giving as a response to their financial blessing. But how has that translated into education reform?

According to a 2013 interview by DeVos with Philanthropy Roundtable, a visit to The Potter's House, a private school that serves low-income students in Grand Rapids and describes its approach as Christ-centered, sparked her interest. She described the school as a safe, loving environment that was "electric with curiosity." It was the sort of place that any parent would want for their child, and she was struck by how difficult it was for many families to send their children there.

"We knew we had the resources to send our kids to whatever school was best for them," she said in the interview. "For these parents, however, paying tuition was a real sacrifice. We started supporting individual students at the school, and that grew into a larger commitment"—a scholarship-granting organization

that provides low-income students with private education.

But while she and her husband were able to support some students to attend private school, what about all of the other children? Granting some scholarships did not address the fundamental problem: a lack of opportunity for all. As she told Philanthropy Roundtable, “traditional public schools are not succeeding. In fact, let’s be clear, in many cases, they are failing.”

Choice, with Accountability

For decades, DeVos has worked with nonprofit organizations and political action committees to expand educational opportunity, particularly (though not exclusively) for low-income students. While her primary focus—and the focus of many media reports about her—has been on vouchers, tax credits, and education savings accounts, organizations she has led

A visit to The Potter’s House, a school that describes itself as Christ-centered and serves low-income students in Grand Rapids, Michigan, sparked DeVos’s interest in education reform through its environment “electric with curiosity.”



has caused considerable consternation in the education world.

That image rests in part on her work with the American Federation for Children (AFC), a vouchers-focused 501(c)(4) organization that she co-founded in 2010 and led as chairwoman until late 2016. Its structure renders AFC a nonprofit that engages in some political activities, and it is affiliated with

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or helped found have also advanced other reform initiatives, such as accountability for student learning and more-rigorous academic standards.

In the 1990s, she served on the boards of Children First America and the Education Reform Council, two early organizations devoted to promoting school choice. In the early 2000s, she started a political action committee to influence education policy in Michigan, the Great Lakes Education Project (GLEP), which she and her extended family continue to support. She also has served on the board of the Foundation for Excellence in Education, an education-reform advocacy organization founded by former Florida governor Jeb Bush.

“She is smart, tough, and passionate about empowering parents, particularly low-income parents,” Bush said. “She is not flashy, but is a person of real substance.” Others who have served on boards with her describe her as a good listener, a consensus builder, gracious, and compassionate—in sharp contrast to the divisive image that emerged shortly after her nomination, which

sister organizations that support school-choice programs and promote school-choice legislation across the country. DeVos’s reputation is also informed by her early role in advancing charter schools in Michigan, where she helped get the state’s charter law on the books in 1993. Charters there have faced regulatory challenges in recent years, particularly in Detroit, leading some to paint her as the sheriff of an educational Wild West.

To be clear, schools in Michigan, and particularly in Detroit, perform poorly on most assessments. Detroit is the lowest-scoring metropolitan area on the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), a series of math, science, reading, and writing tests administered in 21 urban school districts as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). At the state level, Michigan schools frequently score at the

bottom of the table on NAEP, even after adjusting for student demographics. Charter schools enroll about 10 percent of Michigan students and 53 percent of students in Detroit, and while they outperform district schools, on average, it is a low bar of comparison. There is a strong desire, on both sides of the aisle, to try to improve their performance.

In early 2016, spurred by a seemingly perpetual bankruptcy crisis at Detroit Public Schools (DPS)—by this point, counting unfunded pension liabilities, the district was almost \$1.7 billion in the red—the state senate narrowly passed a bill that would bail out the district and split it into two separate entities: the old DPS, which would exist to collect taxes and pay down debt, and a proposed new Detroit Education Commission (DEC) to oversee schooling in the city, including regulating the openings and closings of traditional public schools and charter schools. For a district that spent \$1,100 per student on debt service and was about to default, it was a lifeline.

But that bill fell apart in the statehouse, with much of the blame laid at the feet of DeVos and GLEP. After tense negotiations, a successor bailout bill was passed and enacted in July 2016, one that did not include the DEC.

What—and who—would the DEC have been? According to the *Detroit Free Press*, “The mayor would appoint the commission’s seven members: Three people would have ties to charter schools and three to public schools, with one person from each group a parent. The final member would be an expert in public school accountability systems.” Or, according to American Federation for Children communi-

of schools (both charter and public), and an end to so-called “authorizer shopping,” in which failing schools move to a new authorizer after their existing one withdraws its support.

Indeed, in the voucher world, DeVos is known as having a robust stance on school accountability. For example, in 2016 the AFC issued its first-ever “report card” ranking states by the quality of their private-school choice programs, and its scorecard values academic, administrative, and financial accountability, not just access. To get full “academic” points, the program must require schools to administer standardized assessments, publicly report the results, and submit to independent evaluation. To get all “administrative” points, schools must meet health and safety regulations, comply with nondiscrimination requirements, and conduct background checks on employees. To get all “financial” points, schools must be required to file annual financial reports and demonstrate sound financial standing.

In addition, the lobbying arm of AFC has advocated for increased academic accountability in private-school choice programs across the country. In Georgia in 2016, AFC found itself at odds with other pro-school choice organizations when it backed a statehouse bill to create a new tax-credit scholarship program that expanded academic and financial reporting requirements for participating schools and scholarship-granting organizations. In addition to requiring schools to administer a nationally norm-referenced test to all students and report learning gains, it required scholarship-granting organizations to present detailed statistical and financial reports to the state and barred them from directing

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tions director Matt Frendewey, “a mayorally-appointed commission that was statutorily designed to benefit the failing Detroit Public Schools at the expense of charter schools.” During the negotiations, the DPS interim emergency manager said, “It will be more challenging for DPS to succeed without some kind of control over the opening of new charter schools or other kinds of educational opportunities.”

Privileging DPS stability over charter schools was a deal breaker for the reform-minded forces that DeVos had been helping grow for more than two decades, and they wielded considerable influence in reshaping the law. GLEP executive director Gary Naeyaert criticized the proposal as “anti-choice” with “czar-like power” that would take decisionmaking away from families and place it in the hands of unelected bureaucrats. However, far from a “Wild West” approach to charter oversight, his organization instead advocated for, and got, important accountability measures included in the law: mandatory closure for persistently low-performing charter schools, A–F grading

scholarships to specific schools or religious denominations.

In Wisconsin in 2011, AFC supported legislation to prevent officials at schools ousted from voucher programs from working in or operating another voucher-eligible school for seven years. In Louisiana in 2012, AFC supported increased levels of academic accountability in the state’s voucher program, a controversial stance within the school-choice movement. In a statement that year, the organization reiterated its commitment to accountability: “Strong accountability measures have been at the forefront of the Federation’s efforts in recent years, and the organization today reinforced its continued belief in the necessity to include reasonable administrative, financial, and academic accountability provisions in every school choice program.”

Critiques from the Left and the Right

This stance was almost entirely absent from public debate that followed DeVos’s nomination, which focused mainly on her



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allegedly unchecked power over education policy in Michigan and supposed intention to weaken or dismantle public education.

Not surprisingly, the announcement of her nomination immediately resulted in sharp criticism from the Left. The two major teachers unions issued critical statements, with the National Education Association claiming “the Trump administration has demonstrated just how out of touch it is with what works best for students, parents, educators and communities,” and the American Federation of Teachers describing DeVos as “the most ideological, anti-public education nominee put forward since President Carter created a Cabinet-level Department of Education.” And in the *New York Times*, Tulane University professor Doug Harris offered a critical analysis of student performance and charter oversight after “more than a decade of Ms. DeVos’s getting her way on a host of statewide education policies.”

It’s an assessment shared by Brandon Dillon, chair of the Michigan Democratic Party, who has been critical of DeVos’s

nomination. In an interview, he said, “no other political entity in Michigan has as much power as the DeVoses” and recalled seeing an elected state representative that had run crosswise of the family sitting on the floor and crying after meeting with their lobbyists. The state’s education policy for the last six years can be “100% attributed to her.”

But how accurate is this portrayal? DeVos has had several major public setbacks in her and her husband’s political advocacy, most prominently their failure to start a voucher program in Michigan. In 2000, they spent \$12.9 million to promote a ballot initiative to amend the state constitution to allow for vouchers, which was soundly defeated by a

two-to-one margin. This prompted the founding of GLEP, which focuses on academic quality and accountability in Michigan schools, in addition to expanding school choice. For someone with allegedly hegemonic power, the absence of her signature reform strategy in her home state is surprising, to say the least.

It also may not be terribly instructive to regard Michigan as an example of DeVos's ideals. She doesn't. In her interview with Philanthropy Roundtable, she pointed to Florida as the great school-choice success story because of its "strong focus on offering high-quality options as a fundamental part of the choice program." GLEP's executive director Gary Naeyaert put it more bluntly: "anyone who thinks Michigan is the model is smoking something."

Another widely circulated concern on the left regards some of the phrasing she has used in the past, such as her statement during a 2001 meeting of Christian philanthropists that education reform "advances God's kingdom." Some

dangled in front of states, just wait until more public and private schools are directly accepting federal control through federal vouchers and the next Democratic administration decides they want to tell these schools what to teach kids."

Regarding Common Core, while DeVos has said she does not support what she now calls "a federalized boondoggle," she has financially supported organizations working to develop and implement the standards for years. "There is zero record of her ever opposing Common Core and lots of it showing her organizations supporting it very directly," Pullman said. That record, which DeVos attempted to clarify by tweeting, "I am not a supporter—period," in her only policy-oriented statement since accepting Trump's nomination, is a serious problem for many on the right. As Malkin said, "[Trump] says he's going to end Common Core, then he nominates a woman that every last grassroots activist in Michigan knows was not just mouthing words of support for Common Core, but funding the main state non-profit organization that was pushing it."

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have taken that to mean that her interest in education is driven by the desire to use schools to push a particular social or religious agenda.

That has not been the case at GLEP, said Naeyaert. "She's not interested in EpiPens or what bathroom students use. If it doesn't affect choice, quality, or accountability, we don't touch it." At AFC, board member Kevin Chavous, a former Democratic member of the Washington, D.C., city council, said he "never heard Betsy or Dick lead with 'culture war' issues." Such issues "are not her focal point at all" and were not something they ever discussed, he said. And for all of his many criticisms of DeVos's record, Dillon did not believe she wants to use public schools to push a particular social agenda either.

Lost in all of this back-and-forth is another source of opposition to her nomination, from the grassroots Right. Conservative media mogul Michelle Malkin described her nomination as "one of the biggest battles, one of the sleeper battles going into January." There are two major concerns: a proposed \$20 billion federal school-voucher program and DeVos's longtime advocacy for more-rigorous academic standards, which has included support for organizations advancing Common Core State Standards.

The voucher proposal, which Trump advanced during his campaign, seems an open invitation for more federal control in schools, said Joy Pullman, an education writer for *The Federalist*. "If you think Common Core snuck up on families with the less than 1 percent of education dollars the Obama administration

Naeyaert of GLEP acknowledged that the organization did support Common Core standards "when they were proposed by a voluntary group of (mostly GOP) governors, and when it was adopted by the Michigan State Board of Education in 2010." That distinction mimics DeVos's account on her web site, where she reiterates her support for high standards, accountability, and local control, noting, "When Governors such as John Engler, Mike Huckabee, and Mike Pence were driving the conversation on voluntary high standards driven by local voices, it all made sense."

A Nominee for All Narratives

Despite her long record, plenty of unanswered questions remain regarding DeVos's ability to successfully lead the U.S. Department of Education. Unlike many recent appointees, she has no experience running a large, complex bureaucracy. Even if all of her instincts are correct, and all of the policies she supports are great ideas, is she capable of implementing them effectively? In addition, while we know a lot about her position on school choice, we have very little idea of what she thinks about a huge number of programs and policies that the Department of Education manages. Because so much of her nomination hearing focused on questions of her family's political contributions or particular facets of K-12 policy, we still don't know where she stands on key higher education issues, like Pell Grants, student loans, or for-profit colleges. She has no track record on any of these issues.

Like nature, the commentariat abhors a vacuum, and as a result, DeVos has found herself at the intersection of several trending narratives in American politics and education. Whether it is the role of money in politics and the so-called “donor class,” the emergence of Republican majorities in formerly blue states like her native Michigan, or the still-rocky relationship between accountability and school choice, DeVos has become a convenient proxy for these larger issues. Unfortunately, that has

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caused many to give short shrift to what we actually do know about what she has stood for in the past.

So where is all of this headed?

The short answer is, we don't know. Chavous believes that she will be a “star” in the Trump administration, and Bush said she was the “best choice” that Trump had made for his cabinet. That said, the president has proven to be unpredictable, unconventional, and seemingly unmoored to consistent ideological underpinnings. For what it is worth, he has repeatedly argued that school choice will be a priority of his administration, going so far as to say in his first joint address to Congress, “I am calling upon members of both parties to pass an education bill that funds school choice for disadvantaged youth, including millions of African American and Latino children. These families should be free to choose the public, private, charter, magnet, religious or home school that is right for them.”

Given the tiebreaking vote by the vice president needed to confirm her nomination, DeVos will need to build bridges if she wants to be successful. Her nomination was met with intense scrutiny and massive social media campaigns to oppose her. It will not be an easy task.

But one thing we do know about Secretary DeVos is that she can build strong relationships and recognizes the importance of reaching across the political aisle. As she told Philanthropy Roundtable, “we believe that the only way that real education choice is going to be successfully implemented is by making it a bipartisan or a non-partisan issue. Until very recently, of course, that hasn't been the case. Most of the Democrats have

intense scrutiny and massive social media campaigns to oppose her.

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been supported by the teachers unions and, not surprisingly, have taken the side of the teachers unions. What we've tried to do is engage with Democrats, to make it politically safe for them to do what they know in their heart of hearts is the right thing. Education should be non-partisan.”

On the ground in Grand Rapids, she has won over Superintendent of Schools Teresa Weatherall Neal, who said DeVos reached out for a meeting and has offered support that has helped improve school performance in the district. In a statement, Weatherall Neal acknowledged that the two don't see eye to eye on every issue, but expressed her approval nonetheless.

“I know her, I have a relationship with her, I've seen how she and her family want what's best for children and education, and I know what they have done for me and my district.”

In our polarized, politicized, and uncertain age, these types of relationships will prove important. DeVos has a big task ahead.

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