

January 17, 2017

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman
Senate HELP Committee
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate HELP Committee
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

The National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE) writes to request that during the confirmation hearing for Betsy DeVos, the nominee for Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, you inquire about her history of advocating for the use of public dollars to support private schools and that you seek clarity regarding her plans to support public education.

NCPE is a diverse coalition of national organizations that supports public schools and opposes funneling taxpayer funds to private schools. Our concerns regarding the nomination of Ms. DeVos stem from her statements that her goal as Secretary of Education will be to expand “school choice” options, including private school vouchers, for every child.¹ This, coupled with her history of championing private school vouchers programs for many years, raises concerns among our coalition.

The U.S. Department of Education is the federal agency tasked with overseeing our nation’s public school system. As the head of the agency, Ms. DeVos’ role would be to promote effective education policies and programs and to direct resources to local school districts to improve the education of the 50.4 million students that attend public elementary and secondary schools in the United States. Even if vouchers were adopted, public education would remain our primary system; in states with voucher systems, most students would continue to attend public schools. It is incumbent upon our Secretary of Education, therefore, to ensure that all students have access to quality public schools.

Voucher programs are an ineffective and damaging education policy. First, they divert desperately needed resources away from the public school system to fund the education of a few voucher students in private, often religious, schools. In addition, study after study has shown that private school vouchers do not improve student achievement or provide greater opportunities for the low-income students they purport to serve.² And among their many additional flaws, they lack

¹ Alyson Klen, *Trump, DeVos Call for Ending Common Core at Michigan Rally*, EDUC. WEEK (Dec. 11, 2016), http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2016/12/trump_devos_call_for_ending_co.html.

² See, e.g., DAVID FIGLIO AND KRZYSZTOF KARBOWNIK, EVALUATION OF OHIO’S EDCHOICE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM: SELECTION, COMPETITION, AND PERFORMANCE EFFECTS 32 (Fordham Institute 2016), available at https://edex.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/publication/pdfs/FORDHAM%20Ed%20Choice%20Evaluation%20Report_online%20edition.pdf; Morgan Winsor, *Louisiana’s Controversial Voucher Program Harms Poor Students, Lowers Grades, New Study Finds*, INT’L BUS. TIMES (Jan. 10, 2016), <http://www.ibtimes.com/louisianas-controversial-voucher-program-harms-poor-students-lowers-grades-new-study-2258417>; US DEP’T

accountability to taxpayers, deprive students of rights provided to public school students, and threaten religious liberty.

Calling vouchers “school choice” is a misnomer as they do not provide quality education choices to most families. Schools that accept vouchers are not required to admit all students. And studies show the voucher programs often fail to provide adequate, objective, and language-appropriate information to families in order to allow them to make such an important and critical decision for their child.³ This leaves any real choice with the private schools, rather than with the parents or students. Furthermore, vouchers are especially untenable in rural areas, where families do not usually have options aside from their local public school,⁴ and for families of children with disabilities, who are not always able to access the services and supports through voucher systems to meet their child’s needs.⁵

Accordingly, we urge the Committee to thoroughly question Ms. DeVos both about her position on private school vouchers, as well as on what policies she will support to improve our nation’s public schools and ensure all students have access to high-quality and well-rounded educational opportunity that meets their needs. The taxpayers and students of this country deserve a Secretary who will ensure the Department of Education’s resources and personnel are directed toward improving educational outcomes of the 50 million students who attend public schools.

Sincerely,

AASA: The School Superintendents Association
African American Ministers In Action
American Association of University Women (AAUW)
American Atheists
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)
American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA), AFL-CIO
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO
American Humanist Association
Americans for Democratic Action
Americans for Religious Liberty
Americans United for Separation of Church and State

OF EDUC., EVALUATION OF THE DC SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM: FINAL REPORT (June 2010), *available at* <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20104018/pdf/20104018.pdf>.

³ See, e.g., US GOV’T ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, GAO-13-805, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM: ACTIONS NEEDED TO ADDRESS WEAKNESSES IN ADMINISTRATION AND OVERSIGHT 16 (2013) *available at* <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/658416.pdf>.

⁴ Kevin Carey, *Why Trump’s Education Pick Won’t Be Able to Privatize U.S. Schools*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 23, 2016), <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/23/upshot/why-donald-trumps-education-pick-would-face-barriers-for-vouchers.html>.

⁵ Selene Almazan and Denise Stile Marshall, *School Vouchers and Students with Disabilities: Examining Impact in the Name of Choice*, Council of Parent Attorneys & Advocates (June 2016), *available at* http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.copaa.org/resource/resmgr/2016_Conference/COPAA_Voucher_paper_final_R6.pdf.

Anti-Defamation League
Association of Educational Service Agencies
Association of School Business Officials International
Association of University Centers on Disabilities
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty
Center for Inquiry
Center for Popular Democracy
Central Conference of American Rabbis
Clearinghouse on Women's Issues
Communications Workers of America
Council for Exceptional Children
Courage Campaign
Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund
Disciples Justice Action Network
Equal Partners in Faith
Feminist Majority Foundation
Friends of the Earth
Fuse Washington
Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN)
Institute for Science and Human Values
Interfaith Alliance
Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
League of United Latin American Citizens
National Alliance of Black School Educators
NAACP
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Directors of Special Education
National Black Justice Coalition
National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of Churches, USA
National Disability Rights Network
National Education Association
National Employment Law Project
National Organization for Women
National PTA
National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition
National Rural Education Association

Network for Public Education
One Wisconsin Now
Progress Michigan
ProgressNow
ProgressNow Colorado
Public Citizen
School Social Work Association of America
Secular Coalition for America
Southern Poverty Law Center
Texas Freedom Network
Union for Reform Judaism
Women of Reform Judaism