

EDUCATION WEEK

Betsy DeVos to Urban District Leaders: 'I Support Great Public Schools'

By Denisa R. Superville on March 13, 2017

In her first speech before a group of urban school leaders, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos returned to her familiar themes of parental choice and putting parents and local communities in the driver's seat when it comes to making decisions about children's education.

In speaking to the gathering of leaders of some of the nation's big-city school districts, DeVos said she does not favor one type of school over any other—private, charter, traditional public, or magnet.

"When it comes to the education of a child, I am agnostic as to the delivery system, or the building in which it takes place, so long as that child is in an environment that meets their needs and the parents are satisfied," she said told the audience at the Council of the Great City Schools annual legislative and policy conference.

"If a child is able to grow and flourish, it shouldn't matter where they learn," she said. "And one of those quality options should be a great public school. I've said this before, and it bears repeating: I support great public schools, and I support great public school teachers—because I support students—all students."

Her statement that she supported public schools brought some applause from the group, which is made up of superintendents and school board members from nearly 70 school districts across the country.

In introducing DeVos, Felton Williams, the group's chair and a school board member in Long Beach, Calif., asked for a small delegation to meet with the secretary's staff to discuss the progress they were making and also challenges they faced, including federal mandates, funding shortfalls, immigration, school infrastructure, and ESSA implementation.

"Some issues we will be able to work together on, others we will not," he said. "But we welcome you to our house today, and want to work with you where we can and hope that you will see us as a resource in the important work in front of you."

DeVos thanked the group's executive director, Michael Casserly, and the members for their work and expressed confidence that she and her team would be able to work with the council to improve education for all students and "call out new expectations of excellence and provide every child access to a great education, regardless of where they live or how much their family earns."

"If we can agree on this, then we have a starting point and a common goal," she said. "My philosophy is simple: I trust parents, I trust teachers, and I trust local school leaders to do what's

right for the children they serve. Those closest to the problem are most often the best-equipped to solve it."

As she has done in nearly every speaking engagement, DeVos spoke about what sparked her interest in public education more than 30 years ago—a visit to The Potter's House, a small religious private school in Grand Rapids that provides scholarships to low-income students. For every child who was helped by The Potter's House, there were others who did not have the same opportunity, she said.

A key focus of the speech was parental choice: that parents know—better than any administrator—what's best for their children, and those decisions are often guided by their children.

She also spoke about her support for the Every Student Succeeds Act, which returns major decision-making around education to states and districts and support for removing unnecessary regulations to give districts the flexibility to do what's best in their local contexts. (The Politics K-12 blog reported on the new ESSA template released today, which DeVos also addressed in her speech.)

She said too often the federal Department of Education had created onerous burdens on districts and schools, and that her department would move away from that.

"No teacher in any classroom should feel like the department of education is holding them back from success with their kids," she said. "No parent should feel like the department of education thinks it knows better than they what is best for their child, and no district should feel like the department of education is hampering their ability to improve the learning environment of students."

She also highlighted programs in the council's districts, including Cleveland's Project Lead the Way, Indianapolis' Innovation Schools, and Denver's transportation program, all of which offer students and families ways to exercise choice.

How Did Urban School Leaders Respond to Betsy DeVos?

Reactions to the speech were mixed, but mostly positive, with kudos for DeVos's willingness to address the council and begin a relationship. Others noted that the speech largely stuck to issues that were likely to have broad agreement and that it was light on policy details, specifically related to how any federal choice plan might work.

Allegra "Happy" Haynes, a school board member and deputy mayor in Denver, said she appreciated the shout-out for the city's transportation program. But while the transportation program is lauded, the district constantly has to think about where the money is going to come from to sustain it. She would have liked to hear more about how the secretary plans to address potential funding cuts and where the secretary stood on immigration issues, she said.

Politics K-12 reported earlier today that deep cuts could be coming to the Education Department in President Trump's forthcoming budget proposal.

"We are all worried about the potential cuts that seem inevitable," Haynes said. "If you are going to give more money over here, what does that mean for us? I just would have liked to have heard assurances, or her position, or what her approach is going to be on two issues: one around immigration—what that means in our schools and where she is going to stand on that—and our funding issues."

Haynes also had concerns related to rolling back regulations.

"I personally think the idea that we need to get out of everybody's way and not have regulations is troubling," she said. "For our most vulnerable students, sometimes this is the backstop."

Casserly said that given that the secretary was only a month or so into the job, he was not expecting a policy-laden speech. But this was a good start to building a relationship, he said.

"We were very pleased that she acknowledged some of the good work in our public schools, and we were pleased that she reached out in the end and indicated that she wanted to cooperate where we could," he said. "Our expectations here were about forming a working relationship, and I think we have begun to do that."

William Hite, the Philadelphia superintendent, also said that although he did not hear a clear strategy, he appreciated that she attended the conference.

"She came in, and talked about what she wants to see in schools, which is very consistent with what a lot of us want to see," Hite said. "And removing roadblocks created by the department to allow for flexibility is really important. While we didn't hear a strategy, the fact that she trusts district administrators, she trusts teachers, and she trusts parents—in other words, she trusts those closest to the children who are being educated, I do think that that's something that's encouraging."

"She also said she is agnostic about the type of schools—that I have not heard before," he said. "The fact that she is agnostic about the types of schools but she supports good public schools—that's a statement that's very encouraging."

Deena Bishop, the superintendent of schools in Anchorage, said she was heartened by DeVos's emphasis on success and outcomes for students and was "very delighted" that the speech was positive toward public education.

Anchorage has a mix of successful charter and district schools, and students often move between the two systems, she said.

"It's really about good schools and good education for students, and I heard her speak to that today," Bishop said. "That was not contrary at all to what we want. The idea that she is supporting the work in public schools by taking away or lightening some of the regulations, I

feel is a positive move. It gets us back to ... where the value is added, which is right in the classroom, which I am highly supportive of. I heard positive comments and not anything controversial or surprising."

Eric Gordon, the CEO of Cleveland public schools who also got a shout-out from DeVos, said he was pleased to see the secretary highlight the important role of all schools.

"Our strategy in Cleveland, just as the secretary said, is that every child should have access to a high-quality school, and we use the word agnostic," he said.

"I think today she started to outline priorities at a very high level, of the importance of all schools—not private over public, charter over public, but all schools—and that they have to be good for kids and families," he added. "As long as we all continue to work toward that goal, we'll find a way to be very productive for our children."

(Not to be all serious, DeVos joked in her introduction that it was flattering to be portrayed on Saturday Night Live by Kate McKinnon, who is younger than her oldest son.)