

January 9, 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:

Americans United for Separation of Church and State writes to voice our strong opposition to the nomination of Betsy DeVos for Secretary of Education. We oppose taxpayer-funded private school vouchers because they drain funds from our public schools to support private, religious schools. Accordingly, we oppose Ms. DeVos, who has been a champion for private school vouchers for many years, and has said she will advocate for “school choice,” including vouchers, as the Secretary of Education.¹

Ms. DeVos has pushed for states across the country to adopt private school vouchers, in large part to promote her specific religious viewpoint. She has stated that private school vouchers are a means “to confront the culture in which we all live today in ways which will continue to help advance God’s kingdom,” and a way to let families choose to “educate their children in a school that reflects their world view.”²

Indeed, vouchers primarily flow to private religious schools.³ This threatens one of the most dearly held principles of religious liberty: government should not compel any citizen to furnish funds in support of a religion with which he or she disagrees, or even a religion with which he or she does agree. Vouchers also threaten the autonomy of religious schools by opening them up to government audits, control, and interference. Parents certainly may choose a religious education for their children, but they may not insist that the taxpayers pay for it.

Private school vouchers have numerous other flaws as well. They undermine public schools, fail to improve educational outcomes,⁴ and lack accountability and oversight. Private school

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 Benjamin Wermund, *Trump’s Education Pick Says Reform Can ‘Advance God’s Kingdom’*, Politico (Dec. 2, 2016).

³ See, e.g., U.S. Dep’t of Ed., *Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Final Report*, 17-18 (June 2010) (finding that approximately 80% of the students participating in the DC voucher program attend religious schools).

⁴ Recent studies of both the Louisiana and Ohio voucher programs revealed that students who used vouchers actually performed worse on standardized tests than their peers who are not in the voucher programs. 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>; David Figlio and Krzysztof Karbownik, *Evaluation of Ohio’s EdChoice Scholarship Program: Selection, Competition, and*

vouchers also fail to provide the same rights and protections to students that they would otherwise have in public school, including those in Titles VI and IX of the Civil Rights Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Private school vouchers hide under the umbrella of school choice, yet paradoxically do not provide any actual choice to parents or students in the program; rather, they funnel taxpayer funds to private schools that, unlike public schools, have the ability to accept or reject students based on a number of characteristics including sex, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity, economic status, and academic achievement.

Ms. DeVos' nomination is deeply troubling because she has been selected to serve as head of the Department of Education, but has repeatedly sought to undermine the public school system through her advocacy for private school vouchers. Therefore, we oppose Ms. DeVos' nomination to be Secretary of Education. During the committee hearing on her nomination, we urge you to question her on her longstanding support for private school vouchers and her plans to continue pursuing policies that would undercut the very education system she is meant to lead.

Sincerely,

Maggie Garrett
Legislative Director



Elise Helgesen Aguilar
Federal Legislative Counsel

