

**Opening Statement of Betsy DeVos**  
**Nominee for U.S. Secretary of Education**  
**U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions**  
**January 17, 2017**

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, Senators, thank you for the opportunity to be with you this afternoon.

I want to begin by thanking my family for their support: my husband, Dick, my sons, and daughters, and sons-in-law -- as well as the rest of my family, including five grandchildren, who could not join us today.

I am honored that President-elect Trump asked me to join his team and am grateful for his dedication to education. If confirmed, I look forward to working with him, Vice President-elect Pence and all of you to bring educational opportunity to every family in this great nation.

While we may have differences, I think we can all agree that learning as a lifelong pursuit is a fundamental American virtue.

We are blessed beyond measure with educators who pour themselves into students.

The schools in which they work are as diverse as the students they educate. In fact, all of us here – and our children – have attended a mix of traditional publicly-funded and private schools. This is a reflection of the diversity that is today’s American public education.

Growing up in Holland, Michigan, I attended local Christian schools and then Calvin College. My greatest educational influence in life was a public school teacher named Elsa Prince.

While her students called her Mrs. Prince, to this day, I just call her “mom.”

When Dick and I became parents, education took on a whole new meaning. We recognized that other parents were not able to make similar decisions about their children’s education, based on their income or the zip code in which they lived.

When our oldest reached school age, we visited The Potter's House, a Christian school which serves many low income families in my hometown. We saw the struggles and sacrifices many of these families faced when trying to choose the best educational option for their children. For me this was not just an issue of public policy but of national injustice.

I committed to do something about it, and it’s become my life’s work. I applaud the great work of The Potter’s House and its founder John Booy – who is here with us today – he and his team of teachers are doing a great job. But here’s the sad reality: in the past 28 years, the need and demand for these other options have grown, unabated.

I share President-elect Trump's view that it's time to shift the debate from what the system thinks is best for kids to what moms and dads want, expect and deserve.

Parents no longer believe that a one-size-fits-all model of learning meets the needs of every child, and they know other options exist, whether magnet, virtual, charter, home, religious, or any combination thereof. Yet, too many parents are denied access to the full range of options... choices that many of us -- here in this room -- have exercised for our own children.

Why, in 2017, are we still questioning parents' ability to exercise educational choice for their children? I am a firm believer that parents should be empowered to choose the learning environment that's best for their individual children.

The vast majority of students in this country will continue to attend public schools. If confirmed, I will be a strong advocate for *great* public schools. But, if a school is troubled, or unsafe, or not a good fit for a child -- perhaps they have a special need that is going unmet -- we should support a parent's right to enroll their child in a high quality alternative.

It's really pretty simple.

Every child in America deserves to be in a safe environment that is free from discrimination.

Every student in America dreams of developing his or her unique talents and gifts.

Every parent in America dreams of a future when their children have access to schools with the rigor, challenges, and safe environments that successfully prepare them for a brighter, more hopeful tomorrow.

And every teacher in America dreams of breaking free from standardization, so that they can deploy their unique creativity and innovate with their students.

Our nation's schools are filled with talented, devoted professionals, who successfully meet the needs of many, many children. But even our best schools don't work for all. This isn't the fault of teachers, but a reality that all students are unique, learn differently, and excel at their own pace.

Students also face new challenges today. In particular, our high school graduates are having increasing difficulty accessing affordable higher education.

Escalating tuition is pricing aspiring and talented students out of college. Others are burdened with debts that will take years -- or even decades -- to pay off.

There is no magic wand to make the debt go away, but we do need to take action. It would be a mistake to shift that burden to struggling taxpayers without first addressing why tuition has gotten so high.

For starters, we need to embrace new pathways of learning. For too long a college degree has been pushed as the only avenue for a better life. The old and expensive brick-mortar-and-ivy model is not the only one that will lead to a prosperous future. Craftsmanship is not a fallback - but a noble pursuit.

Students should make informed choices about what type of education they want to pursue post high school and have access to high quality options. President-elect Trump and I agree we need to support all post-secondary avenues, including trade and vocational schools, and community colleges.

Of course, on every one of these issues, Congress will play a vital role.

If confirmed, I look forward to working with you to enact solutions that empower parents and students, provide high quality options and spend tax dollars wisely.

We will work together to ensure the Every Student Succeeds Act is implemented as Congress intended -- with local communities freed from burdensome regulations from Washington. And I look forward to working with Congress and all stakeholders to reauthorize the Higher Education Act to meet the needs of today's college students.

President-elect Trump and I know it won't be Washington, D.C. that unlocks our nation's potential, nor a bigger bureaucracy, tougher mandates or a federal agency. The answer is local control and listening to parents, students and teachers.

For nearly three decades, I've been involved in education, as a volunteer, an advocate for children, and a voice for parents.

I've worked as an in-school mentor for students in the Grand Rapids Public Schools, and have had the privilege of interacting with students and their families and teachers in ways that have changed my life and my perspective about education forever.

I've worked with Governors, legislators, and business and community leaders to expand educational opportunity through options that are making a lifetime of difference for hundreds of thousands of kids this year alone.

And, I've worked with many dedicated teachers who strive every day to help students achieve, fulfill their potential, and prepare them for the global challenges that they will face.

For me, it's simple: I trust parents, and I believe in our children.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you. I look forward to answering your questions.

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