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Trump selects DeVos as education secretary

 By Caitlin Emma and Michael Stratford

Politico

President-elect Donald Trump has tapped school-choice activist, philanthropist and Republican mega-donor Betsy DeVos to lead the Education Department.

Describing DeVos as "a brilliant and passionate education advocate," Trump announced his second selection of a female Cabinet member in a prepared statement Wednesday afternoon.

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DeVos, 58, chairs the American Federation for Children, an advocacy group that has aggressively pushed to expand charter schools and school voucher programs that provide families with public money to spend on private school tuition.

The Michigan native published a tweet simultaneously: “I am honored to work with the President-elect on his vision to make American education great again. The status quo in ed is not acceptable."

The choice is a sign that Trump plans to pursue his campaign pledge to enact sweeping school choice, including spending $20 billion on block grants to expand charter and private school options for low-income children — almost as much as the country now invests in schools serving poor kids and special education programs combined. The idea has long been championed by conservatives but has fizzled in Congress. DeVos' advocacy group helped craft that proposal.

“We know that millions of children, mostly low-income and minority children, remain trapped in K-12 schools that are not meeting their needs,” DeVos said in September when Trump released his plan. “We applaud the Trump campaign’s focus on school choice and laying out common-sense proposals to help all children access a quality education.”

Her selection is also regarded as a nod to establishment Republicans — in this case, from a critical battleground state.

DeVos is part of a wealthy and influential family of Republican donors who held back their donations for much of Trump’s campaign. She is married to Dick DeVos, an unsuccessful GOP candidate for governor of Michigan, former president of Amway and former president of the Orlando Magic NBA franchise. His father co-founded the Amway Corporation.

Betsy DeVos told The Washington Examiner in March that she didn’t think Trump “represents the Republican Party” and she again declined to support Trump during the Republican National Convention, casting her vote for Gov. John Kasich.

However, she did celebrate Trump’s pick of Indiana Gov. Mike Pence for a running mate, noting his work expanding school choice in Indiana.

“Our country needs leaders who will challenge the status quo of K-12 education,” she said in July. “Governor Pence has a proven record of accomplishment when it comes to advancing educational choice and innovation, which are critically important to improving educational outcomes for all students in America.”

DeVos’ selection is sure to rankle teachers unions, who released scathing statements within minutes of the announcement.

"DeVos has no meaningful experience in the classroom or in our schools," said Randi Weingarten, president of the 1.6 million-member American Federation of Teachers. "The sum total of her involvement has been spending her family’s wealth in an effort to dismantle public education in Michigan. Every American should be concerned that she would impose her reckless and extreme ideology on the nation.

NEA President Lily Eskelsen Garcia said in a statement that DeVos' efforts have undermined public education.

"She has consistently pushed a corporate agenda to privatize, de-professionalize and impose cookie-cutter solutions to public education," Eskelsen Garcia said. "By nominating Betsy DeVos, the Trump administration has demonstrated just how out of touch it is with what works best for students, parents, educators and communities.”

The choice also drew mixed reviews from education conservatives because of DeVos' past support for Common Core standards — a position she denied in social media posts Wednesday afternoon. "I am not a supporter — period," she wrote in an online post that she also tweeted.

Frederick Hess of the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute called DeVos a “smart and unapologetic champion for choice, which is what Trump has spoken a lot about. She’s a small government, state and local conservative.”

But others lambasted the choice, citing her involvement in Jeb Bush’s group, Foundation for Excellence in Education, which has championed the Common Core standards now reviled by the right as a government overreach.

“President-elect Trump rightly slammed Gov. Jeb Bush for his support of Common Core on the campaign trail,” said Frank Cannon, president of American Principles Project, which opposes Common Core. “Betsy DeVos would be a very Jeb-like pick. It is puzzling, then, to see reports that the Trump transition team is considering an establishment, pro-Common Core secretary of Education, ” Cannon said.

DeVos said in her post that while she supports "high standards, strong accountability, and local control," Common Core "turned into a federalized boondoggle."

“Have organizations that I have been a part of supported Common Core? Of course," DeVos said. "But that's not my position. Sometimes it's not just students who need to do their homework."

John Bailey, a strategic education adviser who left the Foundation for Excellence in Education earlier this year, said DeVos would work well with governors as they roll out changes under the Every Student Succeeds Act, the education law that passed last year that sets K-12 policy. In approving those plans, DeVos would likely grant states and school districts the flexibility they’ve been hoping for under the new law.

DeVos has been the driving force between voucher expansion in Michigan. She split with former Republican Gov. John Engler, who’s now president of the Business Roundtable, over the issue in 2000. She stepped down as chair of Michigan’s GOP following disagreements with Engler and was soon appointed finance chairwoman for the National Republican Senatorial Committee.

When it comes to charter school oversight, DeVos has fought for fewer regulations in Michigan. DeVos and her husband helped pass Michigan’s charter school law in 1993. They also established the school choice group, the Great Lakes Education Project. Michigan’s charter schools are some of the least regulated in the country, with about 80 percent run by private companies. Chalkbeat reported this week.

Kimberly Hefling and Benjamin Wermund contributed to this report.