

Trump's education chief touts Uber as model for "school choice"

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Last Wednesday US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos made her first major policy statements. She spoke as the Trump administration proposes to decimate public education through budget cuts and vouchers for private and parochial schools.

DeVos was the keynote speaker at the Brookings Institution's release of the "2016 Education Choice and Competition Index," which rates the nation's largest school districts on their "school choice" options. Brookings, a Democratic-leaning government think tank, has produced the index for five years and has been a promoter of diverting public funds to charter operations and other privately run schools since receiving a \$1 million grant from the Gates Foundations in 2001.

In her address, DeVos called Trump's budget a "paradigm shift" in education funding, one that shifts from supporting the "institutions" of public education to making "investments in individual children." Trump, speaking more directly, has said domestic spending programs must be sacrificed to foot the bill for his \$54 billion increase in military spending.

The far-reaching nature of the paradigm shift is apparent in the massive \$9.2 billion, or 13 percent, proposed reduction in the Department of Education for the coming fiscal year. The budget plan seeks to entirely abolish Title II, which funds teacher professional development, class size reduction and salaries for about 9,000 teachers nationwide.

The cuts would also eliminate the \$1.1 billion 21st Century Community Learning Center program, a highly popular program for afterschool and summer activities, including tutoring, English as a Second Language, and enrichment projects for 1.6 million children primarily in high-poverty communities.

The budget will pave the way for an escalated attack

on public education by promoting vouchers and charters, with \$1.4 billion in new money, a down payment on the \$20 billion voucher program promised earlier. (See: "Trump's voucher plan and the right-wing campaign to destroy public education")

Charter school grants will get an increase of \$168 million, with \$250 million going to a private school choice initiative, which would allow the use of vouchers for religious schools. Additionally, \$1 billion is being added to Title I, the War on Poverty-era program designed to aid impoverished schools, but it will be made "portable," to "follow the child" to a non-Title I district, charter or private school and further undermine Title I schools.

These measures proposed for the 2018 fiscal year will follow other immediate cuts to be enacted over the next five months. For the 2017 budget (never passed by Congress and therefore amendable), Trump is demanding \$3 billion in cuts including: 50 percent to Title II, \$52 million to school counseling, \$152 million to the Math Science Partnership, \$147 million to literacy programs, \$47 million to physical education, and \$28 million to Advanced Placement.

In her Brookings speech, DeVos defended Trump's cuts with the hackneyed right-wing refrain that "throwing money at a program" is not a solution. She hailed the supposedly "parent-centric" and "individual child" approach of the administration.

With these rhetorical buzzwords DeVos attempted to justify placing the burden of education upon families while the government is bankrupting their neighborhood school districts. There will obviously be fewer good "choices" for cash-strapped parents who lack transportation and other resources to send their children more distant schools.

Billionaire DeVos was selected as the top education

policymaker of the Trump administration because of her lifetime of opposing the egalitarian concept of public education. She had, moreover, established a network of like-minded politicians across the US, to whom she funneled hundreds of millions of dollars of campaign contributions in their mutual efforts to open the \$1.3 trillion education market for profiteering.

Possibly implying more than she meant to, DeVos compared educational choice to taking an Uber or Lyft. “Nobody mandates that you take an Uber over a taxi, nor should they. But if you think ridesharing is the best option for you, the government shouldn’t get in your way... Why do we not allow parents to exercise that same right to choice in the education of their child?” she argued.

With these statements DeVos, once again, underlines her complete hostility to the social right to free and high quality public education, or public transportation for that matter.

Moreover, DeVos would like to impose the Uber model of contract labor (with repeated lowering of rates) upon educational professionals. This is not a recent epiphany on her part; Amway, the source of her billions, was one of the first to pioneer this contractor employment model of no rights, no benefits and cheap labor.

Today the scandal-ridden Uber ride-sharing company has come to symbolize the exploitation and the prevalence of part-time, low-paying jobs in the “gig economy.” That Uber should represent DeVos’ vision for education is a dire warning indeed.

Defending the pending budget cuts before the Brookings group, DeVos cited a recent report on the Obama-era School Improvement Grant (SIG) program and called it a \$7 billion failure, which proves that “more funding” cannot “provide a better learning environment for those left behind.” The report showed that students did not register improved test scores, graduation rates or college enrollment as a result of attending a SIG-assisted school.

But these statistics undermine DeVos’ ceaseless promotion of school choice and demonstrate the new administration’s continuity with the Obama’s privatization policies. The School Improvement Grant program was one of the numerous competitive policies implemented by Obama and former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, which forced its recipients,

among the most “persistently lowest achieving schools,” to implement government-mandated “turnaround” plans.

SIG was designed from the outset as an attack on public schools and an inducement for charterization. To qualify for the modest grants, districts were compelled to choose from a series of draconian options such as firing the principals and half the staff, implementing “flexible operations,” including longer school days and/or abrogating teacher contracts, closing the school or converting to a charter operation.

The inevitable failure of SIG to raise test scores has now helped DeVos justify the far deeper assault on public school funding by the Trump administration. Alleging that the public education system in the US is irretrievably broken, DeVos said she would find it hard to believe that student scores “could get a lot worse on a nationwide basis than they are today.”

The Brookings speech followed DeVos’s Tuesday visit to the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum with Ivanka Trump where they hypocritically claimed to be promoting science, technology, engineering and math careers (STEM).

The pair did not mention that the proposed education cuts would entirely de-fund the NASA Education office, a leading advocate for science education assisting teachers in virtually every state. NASA sponsors enrichment programs for K-12 students, internships and scholarships for young scientists and oversees efforts to support underrepresented minorities and women in STEM.



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