

US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos booed by students at Florida college

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12 May 2017

On Wednesday, US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos was soundly booed by students while attempting to give the commencement address at Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, Florida, a historically black university.

In the days leading up to the event, Bethune-Cookman students sharply criticized the university administration's decision to provide DeVos a platform at the commencement ceremony.

DeVos was confirmed in the US Senate February 7 by a 51-50 vote, with Vice President Mike Pence casting the deciding vote. The education secretary is widely seen as a particularly philistine and crude representative of Trump's cabinet of billionaires and multi-millionaires.

DeVos is married to Dick DeVos, the former CEO of Amway. The DeVos family is reportedly worth \$5.4 billion, making them the 88th richest family in the US.

Betsy DeVos (whose brother is former US Navy SEAL and founder of Blackwater, Erik Prince) is notorious for her indefatigable opposition to public education. The wealthy, right-wing "school choice advocate" has bragged of her family's efforts to buy favors from politicians, writing in 1997: "My family is the largest single contributor of soft money to the national Republican Party. I have decided ... to stop taking offense at the suggestion that we are buying influence. Now I simply concede the point. They are right. We do expect things in return."

At Bethune-Cookman May 10, DeVos was jeered upon being introduced at the ceremony. Nearly half the audience of 380 students turned their back on the speaker as she made her remarks, which consisted largely of banal calls for students to dedicate themselves to the common good and other standard fare.

As the boos and heckling became louder and louder, school president Edison O. Jackson stepped in and warned students to stop their protesting, or else "Your degrees will be mailed to you," i.e., the ceremony would be halted and the students dispersed. However, the booing continued as DeVos stated she planned to visit the gravesite of the school's founder, civil rights activist and daughter of parents who had been slaves, Mary McLeod Bethune.

"She made racist comments about HBCUs [Historically Black Colleges and Universities], she doesn't know anything about us, and she has the nerve to come down here and speak to us ... And then she has the nerve to speak about Mary McLeod Bethune's legacy. What does she know about that?" commented graduating student Donjele Simpson to the *Washington Post* in regard to DeVos's appearance at his school. A number of students protesting DeVos's speech cited the US Education Department's recent decisions to rescind a number of Obama administration consumer protections for student loan borrowers.

DeVos drew widespread criticism in February when she referred to historically black colleges and universities, such as Bethune-Cookman, as "pioneers of school choice." Such institutions were created historically out of harsh necessity, primarily in the former slave states, in response to the segregation of universities and colleges and the exclusion of black students. Whether the comment was intended as a provocation or simply displayed gross ignorance, many saw DeVos's comment as an apology for Jim Crow segregation.

Last week, President Donald Trump indicated he believed federal funding for historically black colleges to be unconstitutional. Trump was widely rebuked for this comment, and declared Sunday his "unwavering

support” for such institutions, which, in fact, are increasingly integrated.

The protest at BCU occurred in the general context of growing hostility to the Trump administration, including from among those who voted for him. A new Quinnipiac University poll found Trump’s approval ratings have fallen to 36 percent, with 58 percent of those polled saying Trump’s first months in office are “mainly a failure.”

DeVos tried to save face after her appearance at Bethune-Cookman, releasing a statement Wednesday night which declared that “[o]ne of the hallmarks of higher education, and of democracy, is the ability to converse with and learn from those with whom we disagree... We can focus on differences that might divide us or we can choose to listen, be receptive and learn from other experiences and perspectives.”

The statement echoed comments made by Bethune-Cookman president Jackson, who had defended DeVos’s appearance days earlier in a letter, asserting, “When we seek to shelter our students and campus communities from views that are diametrically opposed to their own, we actually leave our students far less capable of combating those ideas.” Neither DeVos nor Jackson sought to reconcile their supposed support for the principle of the free exchange of ideas with their denunciations of the “uncivil” BCU students who turned out en masse to exercise their right to free speech to combat DeVos’s unpopular ideas.

Among various actions as Education Secretary, DeVos has appointed far-right figures to her department, including Candice Jackson (author of *Their Lives: The Women Targeted by the Clinton Machine*) to the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights. Jackson, who like DeVos has made a career of opposition to public spending for education services, is also an ideological opponent of social equality, who has denounced immigrants and other groups in recent social media comments.



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