US education chief Betsy DeVos plots school privatization with venture capitalists

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On May 9, US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos delivered the keynote address for the annual Arizona State University + Global Silicon Valley (ASU+GSV) Summit in Salt Lake City. The event took place the day before the billionaire heiress was roundly booed by the graduating class at Bethune-Cookman University.

Addressing a standing-room only audience of venture capitalists and school privatizers, DeVos dismissed the American education system as "an outdated Prussian education model." She emphasized her desire to end government's role in education and called for scrapping the Higher Education Act of 1965.

Apparently, the US secretary views with contempt the pioneering of free, tax-funded and public education established in the north German state in the early 1800s. The "Prussian model," which was deeply influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, was to become the international model for modern mass education. Minister of Education Wilhelm von Humboldt, appointed in 1809, is largely credited for this vision of education based on inculcating literacy, broad general knowledge, cosmopolitan-mindedness and academic freedom.

The system was already groundbreaking by the 1830s, featuring professional teacher training, a national curriculum, an extended school year to accommodate rural children, a basic salary for teachers, funding for school buildings and even free and mandatory kindergarten. "The Prussian approach was used for example in the Michigan Constitution of 1835, which fully embraced the Prussian system by introducing a range of primary schools, secondary schools, and the University of Michigan itself, all administered by the state and supported with tax-based funding," according to Wikipedia.

In 1843 Horace Mann, considered the "father of the common school movement" in the US, visited Germany to study and replicate the "Prussian model." France and Great Britain enacted compulsory schooling in the 1880s.

It is interesting to note that the "Prussian model" contrasted with a type of Calvinistic utilitarianism promoted by English and Swiss education reformers. DeVos has traced her ideological influences to Andrew Kuyper, a neo-Calvinist opponent of secular education.

DeVos is fully conscious of the scale of the social counterrevolution she wants to impose on American education. Schooling should be largely returned to the churches, according to this arch-reactionary, along with for-profit education companies.

DeVos went on to tell the friendly crowd of edu-business investors and speculators that she was for "get[ing] the federal government out of the way so you can do your job…. It's time for us to break out of the confines of the federal government's arcane approach to education," she emphasized, according to the website EdSurge.

She made her usual "school choice" arguments couched in populist bromides, as in, "Those who are closest to the problem are those best equipped to solve it." She restated her hostility to universal public education: "Our education-delivery method should be as diverse as the kids they serve, instead of our habit of forcing them into a one-size-fits-all model." The assembled entrepreneurs were all aware these were code words for opening up the education "market" for profiteering, in addition to slotting poorer children into low-skill utilitarian jobs.

She promised to "cut the red tape" for education businesses and described the education technology industry as a "thousand flowers, and we haven't planted the whole garden yet."

The gathering consisted primarily of representatives from GSV Corporation, a NASDAQ-listed bank with substantial venture capital investments in education technology including JAMF Software, coursera, Chegg, Curious.com and Course Hero.

At the conclusion of her address, DeVos was asked about the pending reauthorization of the 1965 Higher Education Act, originally signed by Lyndon Johnson as part of his Great Society programs. "Why would we re-authorize an act that is [more than] 50 years old and keeps getting amended? Why don't we start afresh?" she replied.

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The notion of jettisoning the landmark education legislation must have been music to ears of GSV Capital Assets investors. The Higher Education Act of 1965—enacted under the pressure of a mass working-class struggles and the civil rights movement—opened college doors to millions of middle and working class youth for the first time in US history.

HEA provided funding for grants and scholarships, federally-backed and subsidized loans, created work-study job opportunities, provided resources for libraries and graduate programs and supported the creation of a system of community colleges nationally, which today educate nearly half of all US students at nominal cost.

The 1965 HEA was made law alongside the Voting Rights Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and Medicare. All these reforms, won through mass struggles, have been steadily undermined, by Democrats and Republicans alike, and are now targeted for destruction by the Trump administration.

Of course, DeVos's facile dismissal of the Higher Education Act is not surprising from an administration that seeks to turn the clock back for the working class to the 19th century and from a secretary who has expressed support for child labor.

The highly political personnel directing the Global Silicon Valley group, like DeVos, are aiming well beyond the immediate prospects of cashing in on the education market. They have advanced a document "2020 Vision: A History of the Future," which links the business of education technology, profit potentials and national social policy.

This document makes a direct parallel between the evolution of the healthcare industry and the present position of education companies. In 1970, GSV points out, the health care industry only represented 8 percent of GDP and had 2 percent of capital markets, whereas today its holds 18 percent of GDP and 16 percent of capital markets. Likewise, GSV projects a massive growth in the education market—at least a 3 percent rise in GDP sector with more than 100 private education companies boasting a market capitalization topping $1 billion. "This represents a mind-blowing *trillion* dollar opportunity," the document concludes.

Of course, the growing profitability of the health care industry was at the direct expense of the actual health of the US population, which is now reeling from the near-destruction of the employer-based health care system, the skyrocketing costs of drugs and the resultant declines in lifespans. The plundering of public education by the financial elite will now visit the same destructive policies upon children just beginning their lives.

The reactionary political thinkers behind Global Silicon Valley's bank are not oblivious to the political crisis they are provoking. Their statement warns that the growth of CEO pay and social inequality has also meant protests like Occupy Wall Street and an "exploding population of low-income students." For example, "2020 Vision" documents the spread of poverty throughout the US South, showing that between 2000 and 2013, the number of states in which more than 50 percent of the student population was low-income grew from four to 20.

Bluntly stating that a "growing segment of American society doesn't believe that it is participating in the future," they add, "As Aristotle observed, 'Inequality is the parent of revolution'."

With such considerations in mind no doubt, "2020 Vision" puts forward among its solutions the need for universal national service to address the millions of young people without a future.

GSV works with and promotes General Stanley McChrystal's call for universal military service to "strengthen a national ethos" and "restore the social fabric of the United States."

But the venture capitalists add their own entrepreneurial twist to this call for a strong dose of patriotism and obedience among the young. Reprising the words of former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell, GSV calls for mandatory national service "as a force multiplier" for business.

In this regard, GSV lauds Israel as a visionary "Start Up Nation." Ignoring the war crimes and social conditions of Israel—a brutal apartheid-like regime based on the dispossession and repression of the Palestinian people and one of the most socially unequal societies in the industrialized world—GSV glorifies it as the world's best incubator of new businesses, a positive model for the US. In fact, they ascribe the garrison state's success in business development to the Israeli requirement for two to three years of military service.

Betsy DeVos's political bedfellows at GSV and their "2020 Vision" are a clear warning as to US policy plans for the destruction of public education and the dragooning of another generation into growing imperialist wars.

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