

Student Reading: The Department of Education, Betsy DeVos & Education Reform

The Department of Education

The U.S. Department of Education does not build or run or directly control schools or colleges. Nor does it provide most of the funds for K-12 public education – that is the job of state governments. What the ED *does* do is administer a large array of programs aimed at improving schools. The department gives grants to states and local school districts for specific programs that advance the goals and policies set by the leadership of the department and ultimately by the President.

For instance, President Obama’s \$4 billion Race to the Top initiative rewarded state education systems that put a priority on teacher assessments, that accepted charter schools, and that had a sizable low-income student population. The initiative gave school systems, many of them cash-starved, a financial incentive to adopt the policies the administration was advocating.

Betsy DeVos

On February 7, 2017, Betsy DeVos was sworn in as President Trump’s secretary of education. She had been confirmed by the Senate earlier that day by the narrowest possible margin, with Vice President Mike Pence casting a tiebreaking vote – the first time that a vice president’s tiebreaker was needed to confirm a Cabinet secretary.

DeVos’s nomination was extremely controversial. Much of the debate centered on DeVos’s level of knowledge and experience and on her stances on education policy, including her support for “school choice.”

Betsy DeVos is a well-known name in Michigan. She chaired the state Republican Party, chaired an investment firm, and led several education reform organizations. DeVos grew up in a billionaire family and married into another billionaire family. Her brother, Erik Prince, is founder of Blackwater—a firm that supplied mercenaries and security guards for conflicts in Africa and the Middle East. Her husband is the heir to the Amway fortune.

The family has contributed over a billion dollars to a variety of causes, including the Republican Party, and organizations that support education reform. Betsy DeVos has been a leader in the campaign to use public funds to support private schools and charter schools. She has founded and led national organizations that lobby for reform legislation and support school choice candidates for office. She and the DeVos family have contributed tens of millions of dollars to fund these organizations, Christian schools and think tanks. Opponents to her nomination were concerned that public education will suffer under an Education Department devoted to privatization.

Education Reform

While education reform has taken on different meanings over time, the current movement for reform supports policies including:

- “High stakes” testing. That is, using students’ standardized test scores to determine punishments (such as sanctions, penalties, or funding cuts for schools or educators), advancement (such as student grade promotion or graduation), or compensation (salary increases or bonuses for educators).
- Assessing teachers and using those assessments to reward or sanction them.
- “School choice” – that is, using public money to support private schools or independently run schools through various funding mechanisms. This can include vouchers and charter schools.