



November 30, 2016

Honorable Charles E. Schumer  
United States Senate  
322 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Schumer:

I am the Executive Director of the New York State Council of School Superintendents, representing school district leaders across New York who strive day and night to ensure every student receives an education in a safe and healthy environment that will prepare them to thrive in life beyond school.

We are concerned for the future of public education by President-elect Trump's nomination of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of the United States Department of Education and write to share the reasons for our concern so that you may factor them in considering her nomination.

Traditional public schools educate approximately 85 percent of the nation's children. But Ms. DeVos's public record yields little evidence of efforts to improve the opportunities those schools offer children or the outcomes they produce. As the *New York Times* wrote,

...Ms. DeVos's efforts to expand educational opportunity in her home state of Michigan and across the country have focused little on existing public schools, and almost entirely on establishing newer, more entrepreneurial models to compete with traditional schools for students and money. Her donations and advocacy go almost entirely toward groups seeking to move students and money away from what Mr. Trump calls "failing government schools." (November 23, 2016).

It is reasonable to presume that Ms. DeVos will support and work with the President-elect to advance his proposal to redirect \$20 billion in federal education dollars toward establishing a national voucher program while attempting to force states to contribute \$110 billion to this voucher scheme. It is foreseeable that the President-elect may seek to transfer the approximately \$15 billion that is now appropriated for Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to this proposed voucher program. Title I funds are distributed to school districts across New York to improve educational opportunities for low-income students. This funding stream is the single greatest federal education investment for children living in poverty. In fiscal year 2015, New York received over \$1.1 billion in Title I grants to school districts and nearly every school district in the state received an allocation.

**UPDATE:**

Ms. DeVos failed to satisfy our concerns. Senators Schumer and Gillibrand have indicated they will oppose her confirmation. We thank the Senators.

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Siphoning off funds intended for low-income students to establish a national voucher program would starve public schools of funds necessary to educate the communities they serve. A depletion of resources will harm students who remain in those schools and a reduction in resources to higher achieving schools may damage the ability of those schools to continue their great work. Instead of reducing federal dollars to struggling public schools, the federal government should be working with local educational leaders to strengthen them. If schools are failing, the obligation is to fix them and rescue all the children. These dollars would also be diverted to institutions that are not accountable to the public and lack the financial transparency that public schools are subject to, even though they would be receiving billions in taxpayer dollars.

In her home state of Michigan, Ms. DeVos has been a leading supporter of charter schools and private school vouchers. But her state has one of the nation's weakest charter school laws and charter schools there perform more poorly than traditional public schools. A year-long investigation by the *Detroit Free Press* found,

Wasteful spending and double-dipping. Board members, school founders and employees steering lucrative deals to themselves or insiders. Schools allowed to operate for years despite poor academic records. No state standards for who operates charter schools or how to oversee them.

And a record number of charter schools run by for-profit companies that rake in taxpayer money and refuse to detail how they spend it, saying they're private and not subject to disclosure laws. Michigan leads the nation in schools run by for-profits (August 24, 2016).

The paper went on to quote a former state schools superintendent and charter school advocate:

"People should get a fair return on their investment," said former state schools Superintendent Tom Watkins, a longtime charter advocate who has argued for higher standards for all schools. "But it has to come after the bottom line of meeting the educational needs of the children. And in a number of cases, people are making a boatload of money, and the kids aren't getting educated."

Unlike all previous Education Secretaries, Ms. DeVos has neither led an educational institution or served in public office. Education has been perhaps the one and only policy area where bipartisanship accomplishment has proved attainable, as evidenced by enactment a year ago of the Every Student Succeeds Act. But Ms. DeVos has been a partisan and divisive figure. Her most prominent public role has been as a state political party chair and critic of the schools which educate the vast majority of our nation's children.

Twenty-five years ago, Governor Mario Cuomo wrote, "The public schools have been the most significant force in our democracy – the place where the vast majority of Americans were first exposed to our common culture, shared values and sense of national purpose. Now is not the time to abandon the historic public benefits provided by public education."

Today, with our nation so bitterly divided, that unifying force is more needed than ever before, and education policy would seem one area where bi-partisan effort could still achieve benefits

for all our people. But we find little in Ms. DeVos's record to give confidence that she is the best person to help lead those efforts at this time.

Once committee hearings on her nomination commence, we ask that you and your colleagues seek assurances from the nominee that she will seek to strengthen public education and not use her role to divest public schools of their resources to benefit private educational corporations. We know you share our view that public education is critical to the success of New York's children. If Ms. DeVos does not share this view and cannot provide the assurances necessary for you to vote to confirm her, we urge that you and your colleagues vote to prevent her confirmation.

Sincerely,

Charles S. Dedrick  
Executive Director