

Washington Update February 11, 2017

Dear Colleagues:

It's been a testy week here in the nation's capital as the new Secretary of Education is sworn in and the Congress continues to grow even more partisan.

1. Betsy DeVos Squeaks by in VP Tie Breaker Vote and Offers an Olive Branch to her New Staff

After an all-night contentious partisan debate, the Senate confirmed Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education on Feb. 7. For the first time in the history of cabinet confirmations, the Vice President cast the tie breaking vote. With a 51-50 vote which featured all Democrats and two Republicans (Collins of Maine and Murkowski of Alaska) opposing, DeVos crossed the finished line and was, later that evening, sworn in as the new Secretary of Education by VP Mike Pence.

Democrats and multiple education and civil rights organizations waged a virtual war against the DeVos nomination. The nomination generated a level of unparalleled grassroots activism; on the weekend and days before the final votes, a handful of Republican Senators were targeted with protests back in their states and deluges of phone calls to offices, with some offices topping 40,000. The Capitol switchboard reported unprecedented jams on the phone lines. A Utah constituent who reported being unable to get through to Sen. Hatch's (R) office reportedly had a pizza delivered to him with a note asking him to vote against DeVos.

Some national organizations that have never taken positions on nominations came out against DeVos, including the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Both teachers unions opposed DeVos with vengeance. After the confirmation vote Lily Eskelsen Garcia, president of the NEA noted that "There will be no relationship with Betsy DeVos." The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund said that the senators who voted for DeVos "were shamefully derelict in their constitutional duty of advice and consent." Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA), ranking member of the Senate HELP Committee, said that "She would start her job with no credibility inside the agency she is supposed to lead, with no influence in Congress-- as the punchline in a late night comedy show- and without the confidence of the American people. A vote for Betsy DeVos is a vote for a secretary of education who is likely to succeed only in further dividing us on education issues."

But DeVos had her supporters too. Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) noted that President Trump..."chose an outsider, someone much like himself. ...someone more interested in results, rather than paying homage to and feeding the education establishment right here in Washington D.C." Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-NC), chair of the House Committee on

Education and the Workforce said that DeVos enters office with the “chance to prove to those who organized this malicious and personal campaign against her that they were wrong.” Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN), chair of the Senate HELP Committee, said “I think she’ll be an excellent secretary”. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), one of two Republicans who voted against DeVos, tweeted “Although I did not vote in favor of Besty DeVos, now that she’s been confirmed it is important we work together as she takes over.”

Indeed, DeVos appeared conciliatory and inclusive on her first day in office. In live streamed comments to the assembled Department of Education staff, she said she wanted to “come together, find common ground and put the needs of our students first.” She said she was a “‘door open’ type of person who listens more than she speaks.” Yesterday DeVos visited Howard University, an HBCU in Washington DC. Today she visited Jefferson Academy, a middle school in Washington, DC.

See: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2017/02/07/betty-devos-education-secretary-confirmation/97589282/>

See: <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/secretary-betsy-devos-remarks-department-education>

2. House Rescinds Two Obama Era Education Regulations

On the other side of the Capitol on Feb. 7, the House passed resolutions revoking two sets of Obama education regulations: the ESSA accountability regulations (H.J. Res. 57) and the HEA teacher prep regulations (H.J.Res. 58). H.J. Res. 57 was offered by Rep. Todd Rokita (R-In), chair of the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education while H.J. Res. 58 was offered by Rep. Brett Guthrie (R-KY), new chair of the Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training. Votes on both resolutions were largely partisan; however, a few democrats did cross party lines to support the repeal of each set of regulations. Education organizations are split on the accountability regulations, with many civil rights and related organizations actively supporting them. Few seem to be championing the teacher prep regulations which have garnered considerable skepticism from both the higher ed and K-12 community since their inception five years ago.

Many Democrats in both chambers are opposed to using the Congressional Review Act as a mechanism for repealing regulations believing that executive agencies should have the authority to regulate.

Both resolutions are expected to be introduced in the Senate soon, perhaps next week.

See: <http://edworkforce.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=401239>

See: <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2017/roll085.xml>

3. House Republicans Seek to Abolish Department of Education

Just as the Senate was confirming a new Sec. of Education, several House Republicans led by Rep. Thomas Massie (R-KY), introduced a bill which would abolish the U.S. Department of Education. One sentence long, the bill states:

“The Department of Education shall terminate on December 31, 2018.”

Original co-sponsors of the bill include: Rep. Justin Amash (R-MI), Rep. Andy Biggs (R-AZ), Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-UT), Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL), Rep. Jody Hice (R-GA), Rep. Walter Jones (R-NC), and Rep. Raul Labrador (R-ID).

Upon introduction Massie stated:

"Unelected bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. should not be in charge of our children's intellectual and moral development. States and local communities are best positioned to shape curricula that meet the needs of their students. Schools should be accountable. Parents have the right to choose the most appropriate educational opportunity for their children, including home school, public school, or private school."

It is unlikely that this bill will garner enough support to move forward for serious consideration, but we shall see!

See: <https://massie.house.gov/newsroom/press-releases/rep-massie-introduces-bill-to-abolish-federal-department-of-education>

4. New Report Out on the Impact of Cutting Medicaid on Education

AASA, the School Superintendents Association, has released *Cutting Medicaid: A Prescription to Hurt the Neediest*. The report:

- outlines findings from a AASA survey
- highlights how students with disabilities and low-income students will be particularly impacted by a per-capita cap or Medicaid block grant
- describes how communities will be economically affected by a per-capita cap or Medicaid block-grant for school districts
- details the potential of districts to lose critical mental health supports for students that are reimbursable by Medicaid
- notes how recent district efforts to expand Medicaid coverage to students and their families will be undermined by a block grant or per-capita cap

When Congress revisits a replacement for Obamacare, it will be examining Medicaid and making determinations that could significantly affect students and schools, particularly low income students and students with disabilities. This is important to watch.

See: http://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Policy_and_Advocacy/Resources/medicaid.pdf

5. Teacher Shortages Continue to Grow

The Learning Policy Institute issued *Addressing California's Growing Teacher Shortage: 2017 Update* this week. The findings continue to paint a bleak picture concluding that shortages have worsened in the last year, particularly in special education, math and science. Findings include:

- The number of teachers entering the field is near historic lows while the need for new teachers continues to rise
- Significantly more students are being taught by underprepared teachers
- More special education teachers are entering the classroom on substandard credentials than are entering with full credentials
- Shortages disproportionately impact low-income and minority students

Recommendations to address the shortages include:

- Targeted service scholarships or loan forgiveness
- Teacher residency models and other high-retention teacher prep programs
- Eliminate barriers to re-entry for retired teachers in shortage fields, or postpone their exit from the field

My thoughts:

There appears to be little to no evidence that teacher shortages are shrinking anywhere in the country. And the pipeline preparing future teachers continues to shrink. Lowering teacher standards to address the shortages is not a strategy that will lead to strong student outcomes. In my view, this is a national crisis. Any school reform initiative that may be put forward depends on a highly skilled workforce. Without it, no reform will work. A thriving economy and a thriving democracy depend on a well-educated citizenry. It's time for a national strategy to be developed and implemented to address this challenge. What do you think? Tweet me at @janewestdc

See: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/addressing-californias-growing-teacher-shortage-2017-update-report>

My rickety knee and I have decided to part ways next week. So I will be getting to know my shiny new knee and taking a break from Washington Update for a couple of weeks. I'll be back as soon as I can, and hope to stay connected with you on twitter @janewestdc.

Best,

Jane