

Washington Update January 20, 2017

Dear Colleagues:

The changing of the guard is complete in Washington as Donald Trump has become the 45th President of the United States. It has been a high profile and controversial week in Washington for education.

1. Donald J. Trump Sworn in as President

President Donald Trump made his first comments about education today during his inaugural speech at the Capitol. He said we have ... “an education system flush with cash but leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge.” Twitter blew up after this comment (do get on twitter if you aren’t!) challenging both aspects of the comment. In fact, funding for education in states is below pre-recession 2008 levels. The notion of students being deprived of all knowledge....well....seems a big exaggerated, don’t you think?

Education nominee Betsy DeVos appeared to be on the dais with other cabinet nominees at the swearing in at the Capitol. After the swearing in President Trump signed the official nomination forms, including the one for DeVos, offering to Speaker Ryan a signing pen to pass on to her.

For inaugural address see: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/20/politics/trump-inaugural-address/index.html>

2. DeVos Vote Scheduled Tuesday January 31 at 10 AM in Senate HELP Committee

The hearing of Secretary of Education nominee Betsy DeVos has been widely covered by the press and I hope you were able to listen in. The hearing is recorded and available on the HELP Committee website. (see link below.) Democrats grilled the nominee about a wide range of issues and repeated a refrain urging Chairman Alexander (R-TN) to allow more than one round of questioning at five minutes each. Chairman Alexander argued that he was following precedent. Because the Committee had not received the full financial disclosure materials or ethics agreement from Ms. DeVos at the time of the hearing, Democrats asked for more time to vet the nominee. Mr. Alexander was unyielding, offering only that he would not hold a committee vote on the nominee until her ethics form was complete.

Today the Committee received the full financial disclosure information (108 pages) in addition to the ethics agreement, so the Committee was planning to move forward with a vote on Jan. 24. However, late tonight the Committee rescheduled the vote for a week later – January 31, citing the opportunity for more time to scrutinize the material received by nominee DeVos. A vote for the full Senate is not yet scheduled.

DeVos made troubling comments at the hearing which have alarmed some education advocates, particularly in relation to special education:

- At one point DeVos indicated that enforcement of IDEA would be up to the states. When asked if all schools receiving federal funds should have to meet the requirements of IDEA, she responded that that was “worth discussion.” She later noted she was confused about

the question related to IDEA and that when federal funds were involved the federal law must be followed.

- She told Sen. Maggie Hassan (who is the parent of a young man with significant disabilities) that if confirmed she would be sensitive to the needs of special needs students. Hassan noted that what was of concern was not her sensitivity but her willingness to enforce the law.
- When Sen. Collins asked if she would be willing to look for ways to fully fund IDEA to meet the 40% promise, DeVos urged consideration of a different approach – the federal money going to the students directly, rather than to the states (i.e. vouchers).

Other issues of concern include enforcement of Title IX requirements, robust civil rights enforcement, commitment to public schools, equal accountability for charter schools and other public schools, her lack of any experience in education, her potential conflicts of interest with her considerable investments and Board participations, her historic support of organizations that are opposed to LGBTQ equity, her apparent support of guns in schools and her favoring of voucher expansion. Many civil rights groups have come out opposing her nomination and urging Senators to vote against her. Many education organizations have issued letters of concern with some requesting delay on votes until she answers additional questions. (Senators submitted numerous questions in writing to her yesterday.) At the hearing Sen. Alexander included in to the record 92 letters of support for DeVos which he received, including one from a home schooling organization and one from Republican governors.

With the Senate being controlled by Republicans with a 52-48 majority, it appears that DeVos will receive the 50 votes she needs to be confirmed as Secretary of Education. (Remember Vice President Pence would be the tie-breaker in case of a 50-50 vote.) Though Sen. Murkowski (R-AK) expressed concern about the efficacy of vouchers in a rural state and Sen. Collins (R-ME) urged full funding for IDEA at the hearing, it does not appear at this point that any Republicans will be opposing her.

Recording of hearing: <http://www.help.senate.gov/hearings/nomination-of-betsy-devos-to-serve-as-secretary-of-education>

See: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/01/18/six-astonishing-things-betsy-devos-said-and-refused-to-say-at-her-confirmation-hearing/?utm_term=.55a988ffa2fc

See: http://www.civilrights.org/action_center/betsy-devos-is-public.html

3. Department of Education Summary of Loan Forgiveness for Teachers

For decades a number of loan forgiveness programs have been in place, intended as an incentive for people to become teachers. They have not been marketed widely, nor have they been used as extensively as they could be. Just before turning out the lights at the Department of Education, a summary of the options was released which could be very useful for potential teachers and for those seeking to recruit people into teaching. Given the substantial teacher shortages around the country, these program could make a big difference.

https://blog.ed.gov/2017/01/4-loan-forgiveness-programs-for-teachers/?utm_content=&utm_medium=email&utm_name=&utm_source=govdelivery&utm_term=

https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/How_Effective_Are-Loan_Forgiveness_and_Service-Scholarships_Recruiting_Teachers.pdf

I will be out of pocket at a conference next week. Washington Update will return February 3. See you on twitter @janewestdc

Best,
Jane