

• LEGISLATORS FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION •

January 30, 2017

The Honorable Lamar Alexander  
Chairman  
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

We the undersigned state legislators from all 50 states believe strongly that public education is fundamental to a strong and robust democracy and to the formation of a well-informed citizenry. Ninety percent of our nation's children of all different races, religions, cultures, and economic means attend public schools. We strive to make public education a system which provides support to families based on their needs, is welcoming to all, is transparent and accountable, and has high standards. As state legislators, we are primarily responsible for the provision of that public education and view the Secretary of Education position as an important partner to our work. Accordingly, we find Ms. DeVos unfit to be U.S. Secretary of Education.

Ms. DeVos has used her vast wealth to influence state legislation and the outcomes of elections to advance policies that have undermined public education and proved harmful to many of our most vulnerable students; meanwhile, she lacks any direct experience with education, instruction, and school system and program administration. Her confirmation hearing confirmed that she also lacks basic familiarity with cornerstone federal education programs such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. As state legislators, we were deeply disturbed to hear that Ms. DeVos does not understand the difference between federal and state responsibilities in the provision of education to students with disabilities. Her significant lack of experience leaves her unfamiliar with the challenges and opportunities facing the nation's students, educators, and schools.

Specifically, in Michigan, DeVos and her husband have given more than \$47 million in campaign contributions to politicians whose agenda is to undermine public education. She promoted vouchers and for-profit charter schools that divert tax dollars from our public schools while allowing unaccountable corporations to make money off taxpayers, with poor results for students. Because of her money and influence, Michigan's charter schools are among the least regulated in the country. About 80 percent of them are run by for-profit companies. In 2015, a broad coalition of parents, educators, community members, and lawmakers proposed legislation that would have increased funding and strengthened oversight of Detroit's charter and public schools. In response, DeVos spent millions to kill the legislation and scrap oversight of for-profit charter schools. She even fought to allow failed charter operators to open new schools. The results have been dismal. Charter schools' students in Detroit and statewide perform far worse than students in traditional

public schools. For example, 80 percent of students in Detroit charters perform below the state average; in math, it's 84 percent.

In 2015, with bipartisan support, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Every Student Succeeds Act, which transferred much of the federal role in k-12 education to states. We are up to the challenge, and we are working diligently to craft systems that support students and educators while using this federal law as our implementation guardrails. But as we turn our attention to carrying out this important work, we are deeply concerned that Ms. DeVos will bring her lack of experience with public education, her failure to understand key federal laws, and her track record of undermining public education at the state level with her to Washington.

We do not want the failed education policies that Ms. DeVos helped create in Michigan to be spread to other states through a position as U.S. Secretary of Education. We urge you to oppose the nomination of Betsy DeVos.

Sincerely,

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cc: Members of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

*\* Added after the letter was sent to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions on January 30, 2017.*