

Confirmation vote as farce: Senate approves billionaire enemy of public schools as secretary of education

By Niles Niemuth
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Billionaire Betsy DeVos was confirmed as secretary of education by vote of 51 to 50 in the Senate Tuesday with Vice President Mike Pence casting the tie-breaking vote, marking the first time in US history that such a vote was necessary to confirm a cabinet secretary.

Tuesday's vote was the culmination of four days of stage-managed and increasingly farcical play-acting, in which Senate Democrats pretended to be putting up a ferocious battle against DeVos, while Senate Republicans pretended to be manning the barricades on her behalf.

In reality, the outcome was determined well in advance. The two Republicans who "broke" with their party to oppose DeVos undoubtedly cleared their actions in advance with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who can afford exactly two defections given the 52-48 Republican majority, and gave them permission.

The Democrats seized on the prospective 50-50 tie to conduct a 24-hour, round-the-clock "debate" highlighted by liberal Senator Elizabeth Warren's plea for "just one more Republican" to defeat the nomination. Throughout this exercise in empty demagoguery, in which the Democrats claimed to be the defenders of public education and oppose its destruction, every Democrat who spoke was aware that DeVos would be confirmed by virtue of Vice President Pence's tie-breaking vote.

Moreover, the previous Democratic administration, with Barack Obama in the White House and his Chicago crony Arne Duncan as head of the Department of Education, was an unmitigated disaster for public education. More than 300,000 teachers and other

school workers lost their jobs under the Obama administration, which through programs like Race to the Top encouraged the growth of charter schools and other efforts to privatize and weaken public school systems.

For all the Democratic chest-thumping about opposing Donald Trump, DeVos is the first of Trump's cabinet nominees to be confirmed without any Democratic support. Some Democrats have voted for every one of previous six cabinet nominees to be confirmed, and in many cases the votes have been overwhelming. Fourteen of the 48 Democrats had voted for the first five Trump nominees, only defecting in the confirmation of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and now DeVos.

Trump's pick to head the Department of Defense, recently retired General James "Mad Dog" Mattis, was overwhelmingly approved last month by a vote 98 to 1, receiving the support of nearly every Democrat in the Senate, including so-called "progressives" Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren.

An ideological opponent of public education, DeVos has donated millions of dollars to politicians and lobbying groups that support the funneling of tax dollars to private and religious schools through voucher programs and removing oversight of education spending through the establishment of charter schools.

DeVos is associated with some of the furthest right-wing conservative figures and groups in the US.

Her father-in-law Richard DeVos, founder of the Amway pyramid scheme, played leadership roles in a variety of right-wing groups including Focus on the Family, the American Enterprise Institute and the FreedomWorks Foundation. Her brother Erik Prince is

the founder of the notorious military contractor and mercenary firm once known as Blackwater.

In 2000, DeVos and her husband, Richard DeVos, former CEO and heir of the Amway corporation fortune, spent \$5.6 million on a ballot initiative that would have amended the Michigan state constitution to create a voucher program. The initiative was overwhelmingly rejected by voters.

DeVos has also spent her money founding a variety of organizations that buy politicians' support for the privatization of public education including All Children Matter, the Alliance for School Choice and the American Federation for Children. From 1995 to 2005, DeVos funded and sat on the Board of Directors of the Action Institute, a right-wing outfit that has advocated for the elimination of compulsory education and child labor laws.

After decades of pushing for the complete destruction of public education, DeVos will now direct the agency responsible for providing federal funding to public schools, collecting pertinent data, and enforcing privacy and civil rights laws regarding education.

During Senate committee confirmation hearings, DeVos exhibited her complete ignorance regarding federal education laws and made clear her fundamental conflicts of interest.

With no experience in public education, DeVos earned her nomination from President Donald Trump to head of the Department of Education as a result of her ideological hostility to public education; she joins a host of Trump appointees who have expressed opposition to the missions of their respective departments.

Additionally, DeVos was able to attain her position through the massive amounts of money she and her family have funneled into the coffers of the Republican Party and the campaigns of a host of Republican candidates. She admitted during Senate committee hearings that she and her family had donated \$200 million to Republican candidates over the last few decades.

In the last election cycle, DeVos and her family donated \$2.25 million to the Senate Leadership Fund and \$900,000 to the National Republican Senatorial Committee. She personally donated a total of \$1 million to 21 of the Republican senators who voted for her confirmation.

As a supplement to the backwardness represented by DeVos, it was announced at the end of last month that Trump had appointed religious obscurantist Jerry Falwell, Jr., son of the televangelist huckster and founder of Moral Majority, to lead a special panel tasked with eliminating and curbing federal regulations on education.

Falwell is the president of Liberty University, a private Christian university based in Lynchburg, Virginia, which teaches creationism and maintains a code of conduct that forbids pre-marital sex and homosexual relationships among its student population. Students can be fined for attending a dance, visiting alone with a member of the opposite sex off campus, or engaging in "inappropriate personal contact."

The Christian fundamentalist was Trump's first pick to lead the Department of Education but he turned down the position. He will now essentially join the Trump administration without facing a Senate confirmation vote.

Speaking to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Falwell made clear that he would use his task force to play a leading role in shaping federal education policy. "The task force will be a big help to [DeVos]. It will do some of the work for her," he said.

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