

The New York Times uses “diversity” to find common ground with Education Secretary Betsy DeVos

By Nancy Hanover
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In a news article on Friday, June 2, the *New York Times* makes the jarring claim that US Secretary Betsy DeVos’ appointees are a “stark departure from her reputation.”

The leading publication of the liberal establishment suggests that the common perception that DeVos is “an out-of-touch, evangelical billionaire without the desire or capacity to protect vulnerable poor, black, immigrant, gay or transgender students” needs to be re-thought.

The article does not trouble itself to comment, even in a superficial way, on DeVos’ lifelong commitment to the destruction of public education, her promotion and protection of the charter and cybercharter industry, or her pledge to enact Trump’s \$20 billion school voucher plan. No mention is made of her support to the Acton Institute, which has advocated child labor, her hostility to the rights of special education children or her oft-stated belief that education is more properly administered by the church than under public education and secular laws.

No, it is not because of policy issues that writer Erica L. Green and the *Times* suddenly seem to find DeVos “in touch.” Instead, it has come to their attention that DeVos has hired a “sexual assault survivor” and gay woman, a “progressive Democrat who believes a broken education system is a form of white supremacy” and a second-generation Cuban man. Green draws the lesson that DeVos critics should hereafter “focus more on her actions than their preconceptions.”

The *Times* cites Michael J. Petrilli, the president of the pro-charter think tank Thomas B. Fordham Institute [funded by school privatization heavyweights the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Walton Foundation] to echo their analysis: “It’s definitely surprising, and should make people question their assumptions about this administration.”

What may in fact be surprising to some readers is how quickly the *Times* has adapted itself to a more “nuanced” position on DeVos. This *billet-doux* to the Trump administration is another example of how the Democratic Party facilitates attacks on the working class under the reactionary cover of identity politics.

Green’s article describes the appointment of Candice E.

Jackson as acting head of the department’s Office for Civil Rights as “among the most hotly disputed.” As the *World Socialist Web Site* has detailed, Jackson is an ultra-right-wing libertarian hostile to public education or any use of “scarce resources” for public programs like Social Security, subsidized housing, “expensive” health care, or “costly” colleges. Instead, government money should be entirely focused on addressing “the imminent threat of terrorism” and “protecting us from foreign aggression,” Jackson has declared.

There is no daylight, much less a “stark departure,” between the attitudes of Jackson and DeVos on education policy as the article claims. Jackson recently tweeted, “True choice combined with fiscal federalism is the way up for American schools and is on our horizon thanks to POTUS Trump.”

But from the *Times*, we learn about an entirely new side of the controversial appointee: “What is less known about Ms. Jackson is that she is a sexual assault survivor, and has been married to her wife for more than a decade.” Petrilli helpfully nudges the readers, “This appointment should give folks on the left some comfort.”

Next, the author sanitizes and flatters the resume of Jason Botel, the newly-appointed deputy assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education. While admitting that Botel is believed to be a major architect of the Trump education program, the *Times* emphasizes that he is a “registered Democrat who supported President Barack Obama and has spent his career as an educator and an advocate for low-income minority children in Baltimore.”

He, too, is portrayed as a “diverse” outlier. Botel was formerly employed by the pro-charter Gates-funded operation Teach For America. He then followed the well-trodden path to become a founder of a charter operation through the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), the nation’s largest charter school network. Eventually he was named executive director of MarylandCAN, a division of the national pro-charter school and anti-teacher tenure lobbying group 50CAN. The latter was merged with former DC Chancellor of Education Michelle Rhee’s StudentsFirst and is supported by DeVos, the Fordham Institute, Charles Koch Foundation and

the Cato Institute. Botel is a passionate supporter of the Black Lives Matter organization that is funded by, among others, the Ford Foundation.

Green cites Botel's 2014 blog "Black Minds Matter" in which he claims that advocating for school choice was "part of the effort to dismantle the white supremacist system that exists." This piece goes on to state, "Of course, the subjugation of Black minds has been the way that our power structure has kept Black bodies under society's control. When Black bodies get out of our society's control, many Americans of all races experience fear. This experience of fear has been the legal justification for the slaughter of thousands of unarmed African American boys and men throughout our problematic history, up to the present day."

Another box ticked for the upper-middle-class identity politics crowd. Did the *Times* editor then suggest, "Don't forget the Latino!"?

Green delivers. She highlights the accomplishments of José A. Viana, named as an assistant deputy education secretary and director of the Office of English Language Acquisition, who was born in the US to Cuban parents. We learn that he "spent eight years helping the children of migrant workers—including undocumented immigrants—overcome academic barriers that resulted from frequent moves and a lack of access to essential services such as health care."

Not mentioned is the fact that the Viana family is high up in the Catholic hierarchy, his wife a former principal at several Catholic schools and recently named by the Bishop as head of the Secretariat for Lay Formation, Marriage, and Family Life. The Viana appointment dovetails with DeVos' interest in utilizing vouchers to promote religious schools.

All in all, Green claims that DeVos' appointments "show the complexity of the intersection of identity politics and the fault lines of education reform," quoting Ethan Hutt, a professor of education at the University of Maryland. She concludes with Hutt, "If nothing else, Betsy DeVos is an enigma."

What drive! DeVos has been nothing if not consistent and unenigmatic. She has spent her entire life as a heavyweight funder of pro-charter school lobbying groups and as a spokesperson for privatization. Her 2015 SXSWedu speech summarizes it succinctly: "We must open up the education industry—and let's not kid ourselves that it isn't an industry. We must open it up to entrepreneurs and innovators..."

What the *Times* now describes as "complexity" are the dirty machinations of the Democratic Party seeking to cover its tracks while it deepens its collaboration with Trump's domestic agenda. While they cite amorphous terms like the "fault lines of education reform" to try to muddy the issues, it is a fact that the education landscape is fractured by the rationing of schooling along class lines, with a not-insubstantial layer of rich businessmen salivating over the its complete breakup.

These lines "intersect" with identity politics to the extent that

there is a competitive battle between groups of self-interested "identities," i.e., minority and women business owners, who are positioning themselves for the division of the spoils.

It becomes clear that the *New York Times*, representing a significant segment of the financial elite, supports a pro-privatization agenda. Nonetheless, it is grateful when this unpopular narrative can be "spun" as racial or gender-based. The right-wing trajectory of this thinking was on display the following day, as the *Times* featured a front-page article celebrating a black graduation ceremony at Harvard University, noting that such self-segregated events along race and gender-identity lines are becoming more popular.

Racialism and all manner of divisions are being promoted at the highest levels of government to undermine the development of a growing class consciousness and divide the working class. It is not for nothing that masses of people have experienced the "first black president" and his eight years of crimes against humanity—expanding wars and social counterrevolution at home, not the least of which was his school privatization agenda and draconian budget cuts to education. While the *Times* makes clear that there is no limit to the anti-democratic use of identity politics by the phony "left," such reactionary diversions are aimed at a very narrow strata and are already wearing quite thin.

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