



CITY OF PHILADELPHIA CITY COUNCIL

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COUNCILWOMAN AT-LARGE

January 13, 2017

Robert P. Casey Jr., United States Senator
393 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Casey:

Public schools are at the heart of our democratic society. That's why millions of Americans will be paying close attention as the Senate holds hearings on our nation's top education official on January 17.

Based on her track record in politics and education policy, Betsy DeVos' potential confirmation would pose great harm to students in Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, and across the country. I ask you to oppose the nomination of Betsy DeVos as education secretary and to ensure that your committee conducts a robust open hearing that provides an opportunity for outside witnesses and testimony to present this controversial nominee's full record to the nation.

Billionaire Betsy DeVos is the first candidate for education secretary with no relevant experience in the classroom, running a public school system, or managing large organizations. For years, she has devoted her efforts and her family's wealth to expensive lobbying campaigns: to privatize public education; to expand charter schools without accountability; to lobby for voucher programs that divert public resources to private and religious institutions; and to eliminate the power of labor unions. Moreover, in the absence of a complete ethics review, her family's extensive holdings raise serious concerns about conflicts of interest and her ability to fairly manage the Department of Education.

Pennsylvania's experience provides direct insight into the harmful impact of the failed policies Ms. DeVos has spent her life advancing.

Betsy DeVos and the consequences of privatization

Our state already feels the ill effects of a weak charter law that makes it difficult to close corrupt or poor-performing charter schools. The Pennsylvania Auditor General has called for a complete overhaul of charter school accountability and governance, citing numerous examples of financial mismanagement, conflicts of interests, and failures to actually educate students in both cyber and brick and mortar charter schools across the state. Ms. DeVos' single-minded efforts to block and undermine charter school accountability laws should disqualify her from consideration for this important post.

Ms. DeVos shows no interest in reining in even the worst offenders on the school privatization frontier and, in fact, has lent them her support. Pennsylvania has a large cyber charter sector serving more than

36,000 students; it is the state's poorest-performing school model and the subject of numerous corruption allegations. Pennsylvania also offers one of the most regressive Education Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) programs in the nation, not only steering tens of millions a year in tax contributions toward private and religious schools, but also allowing for excessive 20% profits to be collected by EITC organizations.

Betsy DeVos and the failure to adequately fund public education

Charter growth in the absence of adequate funding has starved public schools. In 2013, Philadelphia closed down 24 public schools in a single year – citing fiscal austerity – but then proceeded to expand charters. Today, Philadelphia now has two massive and unequal systems of education in its public and charter schools. Ms. DeVos' focus on charter growth without regard to cost is financially reckless and economically unsustainable. It has exacted an enormous toll on student learning, in particular through the failure of Philadelphia schools to meet curricular requirements, adequately staff schools, and provide legally mandated services for students with special needs.

Had Ms. DeVos' attempts at vouchers in Pennsylvania gone through, they would have further depleted public education funding that is already grossly deficient and under state constitutional challenge.

Betsy DeVos and buying influence

Ms. DeVos has been an unabashed cheerleader for the role of dark-money in politics, despite the fact that she has significant unpaid fines for state election violations. She has said of her donations that she has “decided...to stop taking offense at the suggestion that we are buying influence. Now I simply concede the point. They are right. We do expect some things in return.”

We have already fought in Philadelphia to resist unpopular policies of school closings and privatization that are promoted by wealthy donors and their dark-money organizations. Such organizations have violated our City's ethics laws regarding undisclosed lobbying in order to win contracts while circumventing public processes. Our fight to gain lobbying disclosure and ethics rules has shown the urgent importance of transparency, since funders may have financial interests in the decisions they advocate.

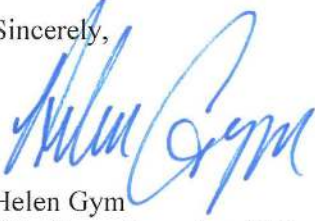
Ms. DeVos' aggressive lobbying efforts in Michigan and across the country have been well documented in the media, but it is important to note that Ms. DeVos has unleashed her family's wealth to buy influence in Pennsylvania and promote policies that hurt public school districts and the millions of children they serve. Through her American Federation for Children, she has funded political entities such as Excellent Schools PA and Students First PAC, which actively fought to stymie statewide efforts to improve public school funding and advocated for vouchers and rapid charter school growth. In 2012 alone, AFC and Students First PAC spent \$2.15 million in Pennsylvania—of a total \$7 million spent nationally—to expand their impact on education policy.

The federal role in education

In the past few years, Philadelphia has seen the federal government effectively use its financial and regulatory power and its bully pulpit to challenge unfair disciplinary practices and advance educational equity. Civil rights organizations are deeply concerned that this progress can be quickly rolled back. Putting the department's funds, regulatory powers, and public position in the hands of Betsy DeVos would undermine those gains and endanger the education and well-being of millions of young people. Her belief that an unfettered marketplace should be the primary arbiter of schooling in America puts Ms. DeVos at odds with the federal government's core responsibility to advance equity and root out discriminatory practices.

Her track record here in Pennsylvania, and especially in Michigan, demonstrates just how poorly her policies and practices have played out, failing to improve education for children while adding tremendous costs and harm to taxpayers. After examining her record, I ask you to vigorously oppose the nomination of Betsy DeVos to be the United States Secretary of Education.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Helen Gym". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Helen" and the last name "Gym" clearly distinguishable.

Helen Gym
City Councilmember At-Large
City of Philadelphia