



Transforming Education – The DeVos Factor

Insights

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Now that debates have faded over the definition of student performance and whether guns in schools are necessary to protect against grizzly bears, everyone is settling into the reality that Betsy DeVos now leads our nation's educational institutions. She will help shape education in the country for the next generation, and to say that change during this time is inevitable states the obvious. Depending on your perspective, the anticipated changes signal either a retrenchment to inequity or evolution to a fuller opportunity for all students. At a minimum, you can expect a significant shift in a number of educational priorities.

Portfolios Of Choice

Expanding school choice appears to be the number one priority for DeVos. In nearly every public statement since her nomination to Secretary of Education, DeVos has advocated for increasing the number of charter, private, virtual, and similar types of schools, saying they will bring value by creating more opportunities for children. She does not see similar growth for traditional public schools.

In these views, DeVos has the backing of the White House; President Trump's State of the Union address emphasized school choice as an educational priority, calling on school vouchers as the ticket out for currently underserved African-American and Latino student populations. While DeVos may have good intentions by seeking new solutions for those attending schools with track records of institutionalized failure, some have questioned whether she is best suited to spearhead the type of transformative change she is proposing.

DeVos has demonstrated she is not afraid to court controversy before even starting down what will inevitably be a difficult road to successful implementation of her goals. On February 27, 2017, DeVos released a statement after meeting with presidents from several historically black colleges and universities (HBCU), celebrating HBCU as "real pioneers when it comes to school choice." She explained, "they are living proof that when more options are provided to students, they are afforded greater access and greater quality."

Some people embraced the spirit of this sentiment, while others chose to focus on the context surrounding the origins of HBCU – a time when colleges and universities in this country barred admission of black students. Rather than duck and run from the high-profile controversy, DeVos

continued engaging in the conversation, explaining at a public event the next day, “HBCU history was born not out of mere choice, but out of necessity.”

Regardless of how you feel about DeVos’ views on this and similar matters, her opinions cannot be ignored given her role on Trump’s executive team. Should the new administration actually create a national school choice voucher program as she has suggested, opportunities will unfold for independent, charter, private, virtual, and religious schools. Now is the time for these schools to determine how well they are positioned for the anticipated significant increase in enrollment.

How Private Schools Should Prepare

We recommend convening a core team to review your school’s strategic plan and identify whether your school desires to position itself for the possibility of expansion. If so, the core team should begin to develop options for how to support enrollment increases. Make sure to include board members, lead administrators, facility and IT managers, and legal counsel in these conversations.

Schools taking steps to position themselves now will undoubtedly be able to benefit most readily from a national school choice voucher program. It is key, however, to make sure the strategy your school develops is generalized and flexible enough to adapt to developments from a national and state level, and does not result in premature expense and costs.

It is also important to work with your legal counsel to understand the impact that accepting a voucher from the national government will have on your school. Private schools accepting vouchers that come from money defined as federal financial assistance by Congress are subject to obligations under various federal laws, including Title IX, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, and similar laws that may change how the private school operates.

The Fate Of Public Education

As DeVos moves toward implementing greater school choice, there is one segment of the educational sector likely to encounter negative consequences: public schools. DeVos appears not to view a decline in public school enrollment as relevant to the school choice conversation. In states where enrollment numbers dictate revenue to public schools, the consequence of school vouchers is potentially catastrophic. Indeed, public school systems are now running with significantly less revenue due to enrollment decline occasioned by the charter school movement.

For the most part, public school systems have not fully positioned themselves as competitors in education since the onset of charter schools. Many times the inability to “re-create” the public school system is due to regulatory requirements, such as free appropriate public education (FAPE) requirements for special education students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Other hurdles spring from systemic inflexibilities created through labor contract obligations. On that latter point, much work is recommended.

Key to sustaining each public school system during the DeVos era will be the ability of boards of education, superintendents, CEOs, treasurers, CFOs, union leaders, and lead teachers to truly collaborate. What public schools need is the type of transformation anticipated under DeVos – a completely new option. Public schools must quickly re-invent themselves today to remain alive and competitive tomorrow.

Similar to the advice provided above for private schools, we recommend public schools convene a core team comprised of board members, administrative and union leaders, and legal counsel to identify ways to realign relationships and working perspectives to better support school learning environments. The goal should be to attain the true “community of learning” parents and their children want, where students grow and succeed. The fate of our public school system is now squarely in the hands of leaders at the local level.

Final Thought

The current political environment requires our schools to actively lead in innovative ways to better support students, cultivate and foster diversity in the educational setting, and ensure continued excellence in education. Hard decisions may be needed in the next four years.

It is important to prepare now by reviewing your school’s mission, strategic plan, and operations in order to align your decisions and actions in a way that will enable the school of the future to emerge to meet your present vision.

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