From:	Ruth Melton
To:	Ruth Melton
Subject:	Q & A With Betsy DeVos
Date:	Wednesday, September 20, 2017 12:54:57 PM

Q&A: One-on-One with U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos

Education Week – Politics K-12

By Alyson Klein on September 18, 2017 3:36 PM

U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has faced some big challenges in her more-than six months in office—setbacks in Congress on her school choice proposals, difficulty staffing her department, protestors greeting her at every turn, not to mention the political stickiness of serving a controversial president.

She's also come into the agency at a consequential time, with every state filing a plan to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act, the first update to the main federal K-12 law in over a decade. And she may well be at the department when Congress next considers an update to special education laws.

We talked about all of that and much more in a wide-ranging interview Friday, the final day of the secretary's "Rethink School" tour, which kicked off last Tuesday and covered six states.

You can read an analysis of highlights of our conversation here. And you can read more

about the final stops on the tour here.

This transcript has been edited and organized for clarity and length, and some questions have been paraphrased.

Public Education

What have you learned about public schools over the course of your travels as secretary?

We intentionally looked for [schools] that were doing things, differently and creatively, and innovatively. It was really great to see a wide variety of approaches. ... We went through the middle of America and really visited quite a number of unique and different kinds of schools and approaches to school.

But in general, in going to public schools, have you seen or learned something in talking to educators that you just didn't know before?

I think I've had enough conversations in enough different places with educators to know that there's a higher than average level of frustration around the inability to really try to do things differently. The bureaucracy and forces of status quo ... it's hard to change, and in too many places there isn't the kind of autonomy at a building level to really kind of break out of that mold and do things differently to meet students' needs.

Can the federal government come in and encourage autonomy?

[In her response to that question, DeVos noted her recent visit to Hope Academy in Indianapolis, which enrolls students recovering from substance abuse. She cited discussion about the need the need for more recovery high schools to help students cope with substance abuse.]

The solution to that is not to decide at the federal level, 'Well, we're going to have all of these recovery high schools. ' It's to really help create the environment and encourage states to create the environment that these kinds of schools can grow and happen.

Civil Rights Enforcement

A lot of civil rights advocates have big concerns about the Trump administration, decisions like rescinding the Obama administration's transgender guidance, the Justice Department's recent moves to pull back on affirmative action, and your department's changes to reviews for civil rights complaints. Are there specific policies or actions you've taken that you can point to reassure those folks?

Let's take the transgender guidance to start with. ... We made it really clear that we're going to continue to investigate and to address any concern that's brought to the department that involves discrimination [against] students. ... We're committed to helping to ensure that students have a safe and nurturing environment in which to learn.

There are folks, though, who are really worried about the fact that you're no longer going to be looking at complaints for evidence of systemic discrimination, like the previous administration did. What would you say to reassure those folks?

I have confidence in those within the office for civil rights that if they think there's something beyond one specific instance [in a complaint] they're [going to] look at it, they're going to study and investigate it. But I'm really thankful that they have made it a priority to bring some resolution to so many of these cases that have been hanging out there for literally years.

Your recent comments on Title IX and campus sexual assault obviously generated a lot of attention. What's your overall vision when it comes to Title IX?

I think we clearly have a situation where the process has not worked for all students, has not been fair or right for all students, and we need to go through a rulemaking process to arrive at a result that is going to treat all students fairly. As I said in my remarks, I credit the last administration for bringing this issue out into the light and want to reiterate the commitment to the fact that those who bring an allegation of sexual assault should be taken seriously. And by the same token, due process should be taken seriously.

School Choice

How important is it for your policy agenda that a new tax credit scholarship be included in the tax reform package that's slated to be released soon?

I think what's most important that—whatever is done or originated at the federal level—that it not be a new and expansive program to be administered at the federal level, and secondly that we do it at the right time and under the right circumstances.

I've been at this work for a really long time. I'm impatient, but I also understand the necessity for patience and for the right dynamics to be developed. So what comes to my mind is a really good motto that a family adviser has shared with us at a regular interval, which is "hasten slowly," and I think that's a really good phrase for me to keep in mind.

Would you say, though, that a federal tax credit scholarship is a big new program?

Part of hastening slowly is to make sure that whatever is done at the federal level is going to actually going make a difference and it is actually not going to expand the scope and scale of the federal government. The reality is that most of the momentum around this, and frankly most of the funding around it, comes at the state level. More and more states are adopting programs that embrace a wide range of choices. And I expect that to continue apace.

What are the challenges in getting members of your own party to share your commitment to school choice?

It does require a lot of groundwork with members of Congress. There are clearly a lot of members who support [the] philosophical underpinnings, and we have to marry that with a practical proposal.

I heard, and this is a Washington rumor, that you met with President Trump and he told you face to face that he wasn't going to be able to push for the tax credit

scholarship. Do you think he still shares your commitment to school choice?

Yes.

What can we expect from the White House then on school choice?

The right time and the right situation. We'll have more to say.

Even without Congress and without the White House, you have a lot of levers at the department to push school choice. What can you do through executive action on school choice?

I don't want to start things or expand things at the federal level ... Now, we do have some competitive-grant processes. We are clearly looking at ways to continue to help encourage empowering parents with more choices. But I think equally important, probably more important, are tours like [the one] we did this week to really highlight and expose to more people the beauty of options and choices and to continue to make the case that all parents, not only ones that have the economic means, should be able to have a decision-making power to make some of those choices.

The Dream Act

Five of your predecessors signed a letter urging Congress to pass the Dream Act**. Do you stand with your predecessors, do you think that Congress should pass the Dream Act?**

I've said that we are a nation of laws. And we are a compassionate people, and I think it really is up to Congress to take this up and address the issue and bring clarity and resolution.

Do you think they should pass it?

I think they need to act upon what the president has challenged them to do. And which specific piece of legislation, I am not going to wade into. My heart is certainly with students who are here not by their own volition.

ESSA Implementation

I know the Every Student Succeeds Act passed before you came into office, but if you had been secretary when it was being developed, what policies would you have pushed for?

I think they did a good job, given the fact that it was supported in such a bipartisan fashion, to push flexibility down to the state level. I probably would have pushed for even more flexibility than is in the law.

In what areas?

The legislation is lengthy and has way too many subparts that are more prescriptive than they need to be. But that being said, I'm encouraged that there are opportunities for states to really implement ESSA in a way that does allow a lot more creativity and flexibility. I'm encouraging states to do so and not to err on the side of caution, but to really push and go up to the line, test how far it takes to go over it. And for them to do so with their local districts and local communities.

New Hampshire and Arizona have passed testing laws that are different from ESSA's requirements. Would you give them flexibility to stick to their own laws if they asked you for it?

Everybody has to comply with the law. I'm going to approve every plan that complies with the law. Now, they can have their own requirements within the state that they decide to act upon, but from a federal perspective as long as they comply with the law, they're going to be approved.

So you wouldn't be interested then in waiving ESSA's testing requirements?

They have to comply with the law.

You changed the process for reviewing ESSA plans midway through**, relying on phone calls instead of feedback letters. Why did you do that, and are you worried about transparency?**

This is the first time that anybody has had to implement an ESSA plan, and so we have been finding our way on that. We want to make sure we are working with states as collaboratively and openly as possible. I think the process that we've arrived at now is one that is being well-received by the states. ... Words on paper can be interpreted [in lots of] different ways by people, and having just conversation [about] where there is an area of question or a desire for clarification ... seems to be a much more colloquial way of dealing with and navigating through the process.

So you don't have concerns then about transparency?

No. Not at all. As you well know, there's plenty of people that talk about all this stuff.

Staffing the Education Department

Staffing key positions at the department has been slow. How has that complicated your effort to move your agenda?

Let's just say I've made decisions and the president has signed off on many of those decisions. It's the process of paperwork with the FBI and the [Office of Government Ethics] that has taken months and months and months.

Has the slow staffing made it tougher to pursue your agenda without having some of those big players in there?

It's certainly made it challenging for all of those who are there to really carry a much greater burden of responsibility than [they would] otherwise.

[EdWeek has reported that Jim Blew, the director of Student Success California, and Frank Brogan, a former Florida state chief and lieutenant governor, will likely be joining the administration, as the assistant secretaries for policy, and K-12 schools, respectively. DeVos declined to confirm that.]

Some of your staff has come under criticism from Capitol Hill, including Jason Botel **(the acting head of the office of elementary and secondary**

education) and Candice Jackson **(the acting head of the office for civil rights.) Has that made it hard to move your agenda on the Hill?**

I don't think so at all. I think that's kind of inside baseball, really.

Teacher Issues

We've heard you talk a lot about the importance of innovation and teacher training during this trip. But the president has proposed budget cuts funding for teacher development and Title IV, which can be used for personalized learning and innovation. How do you square your push for innovation with those cuts?

DeVos said that Title II, the main program for teacher quality, is "much too prescriptive and was really shown to not have any real effect or impact." States, she said, can use other federal funding for teacher development.

President Trump called for putting in place merit pay for teachers on the campaign trail**. I know that's something you've supported in the past. Can we expect anything from the administration on this front?**

I think mandating a one-size-fits-all approach from the federal level is not something I'm seeking to pursue. And I don't believe the president [would] embrace that either. [She favors] encouraging states to look at how [they] are respecting the teaching profession and how much autonomy [teachers have] to make decisions in their schools and in their

classrooms. ... I do think that great teachers should be really well compensated and teachers that are not effective should not be in classrooms.

Special Education

At some point during your tenure, Congress may want to reauthorize the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. What are your priorities there?

I think Congress needs to seriously look at the commitment they made when passing the act to fund it. I think there has to be a review of the act and all of the mandates put on states. It doesn't match up with the funding. I think that there's opportunity to support parents whose kids are using an [individualized education program], or have an IEP to allow them more flexibility in making decisions around their child's education, and I think that certainly is an area that should be reviewed regularly by Congress.

Do you mean the regulation, or the funding levels?

I think both, I think they all need to be reviewed regularly and considered for where they are and what the realities are.

Would you push for full funding of IDEA? That's 40 percent of the excess cost of educating a child with disabilities.

I think it's a fair question to ask Congress about what the funding levels should be. Right now it's about 15 to 18 percent. And yet, the regulations continue to sort of get piled on here and there. They just continue to sort of make it more and more cumbersome and more and more burdensome for states and for local districts. There has to be, I think, a regular review of that and look at the balance of that, and see what's really right. But most of all what's really right for the students we're trying to serve and for the families and what kind of empowerment do they have in that decision-making.

So you want might want to call for slimming down regulation, but also upping the funding for IDEA. Do I have that about right?

I'm not advocating one way or another right now. I'm just saying it's clear that Congress has not funded it at the level they committed to when the law was passed. And I think that is something that should be reviewed on a regular basis.

Going Forward

Your predecessor, Arne Duncan, stuck around for pretty much the entire Obama administration. Do you think that you'll do the same with President Donald Trump?

I'm committed to being there for this term.

What have the best and worst moments for you on the job so far?

The best moments are with students, the best moments are hearing from them, especially ones that are really excited and energized by whatever school and education environment they're in. I don't really have any bad moments.

Not even showing up at a place where there are protestors?

That doesn't bother me. ... In terms of not-great moments, it's when you want to get something done and it takes forever in a bureaucracy. Coming from the private sector where you want to get something done, you get it done, it happens, that's frustrating.

Can you give me a specific example?

Just about everything. There's not too many things that [don't] take much longer than they need to. And the funny thing is, in talking to a lot of the career staff about these things they all nod their heads and say, 'We know, it's so frustrating, and it's like, well, who continues to make these processes more and more cumbersome and what are going to do?'

One of my big goals is to really fundamentally change the culture and processes within [the department] to allow things to move and flow much more effectively and efficiently. I think it's probably easy for cabinet members to come and you've got your list of things you really want to focus on trying to effect and accomplish, and I think it's probably pretty easy to say, "OK, I'm going to ignore these things that are really driving me crazy because I'm not going to do anything about them." But I don't know, I can't accept that.

U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos talks with students at the Science Focus Program/Zoo School in Lincoln, Neb.--Nati Harnik/AP

DeVos visits the Cadet Field House as cadets work on their physical tests during a tour of the U.S. Air Force Academy as part of her "Rethink Education" Tour. --Dougal Brownlie/The Gazette via AP

The secretary cheers with Eastern Hancock students during a high school football game between Eastern Hancock and rival Knightstown in Charlottesville, Ind. --Darron Cummings/AP

DeVos reads to kindergarteners during a visit to St. Mary's Catholic School in Lincoln . --Eric Gregory/The Journal-Star via AP

Protesters decrying Devos' support of charter schools and vouchers march to the Lincoln Children's Zoo in Lincoln as DeVos visited the Zoo School. --Ted Kirk/The Journal-Star via AP