New Education Secretary Betsy DeVos Leaves Educators Concerned

by Kelly Regnier,
504 Word Editor

When Donald Trump became the President-elect of the United States, there were varied reactions from people across the nation, ranging from anger to jubilation. While educators across the nation may have been divided in their reactions to the new President, their reactions to his appointee for Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, were not.

Educators across the country were horrified by this choice. The daughter of a billionaire, Edgar Prince, DeVos attended private schools her entire life. She married into the DeVos family, and her husband is the multi-billionaire heir to the Amway fortune. None of their four children attended a public school.

DeVos’ nomination was one of the most hotly contested of President Trump’s Cabinet appointments. A long-time supporter of charter schools, DeVos has publicly stated, “I am honored to work with the President-elect on his vision to make American education great again. The status quo in ed is not acceptable.”

DeVos’ confirmation hearings became very long and drawn out, as Democratic Senators from across the country spoke out against DeVos’ nomination. Eventually, two Republican Senators would break party lines and vote against her nomination.

In the end DeVos was approved, with Vice-President Pence breaking an unprecedented tie in the Senate.

Following the DeVos’ confirmation, AFT President Randi Weingarten said, “It’s telling that even when Trump had full control of the legislative and executive branches, he could only get DeVos confirmed by an unprecedented tie breaking vote by his vice president. That’s because DeVos shows an antipathy for public schools; a full-throttled embrace of private, for-profit alternatives; and a lack of basic understanding of what children need to succeed in school.”

DeVos has long been a supporter of school choice, and has been an outspoken champion of Michigan’s charter school system. The success of this system has been questioned voraciously by media outlets across the nation.

IFT president Dan Montgomery weighed in by saying, “Here in Illinois, voters don’t want more so-called ‘choice.’ They want fully-funded, vibrant public schools where their kids will get a well-rounded education in their own neighborhood. Yet our leaders, like Trump and Governor Bruce Rauner – to whom the DeVos family has generously contributed – are focused on promoting charters, which perform worse than regular public schools, exclude children with special needs, and aren’t held to the same standards of transparency and accountability, even though they receive public funds.”

So what can public school educators expect with DeVos as Secretary of Education? It doesn’t take much effort to see that she will attempt to push school choice as an option across the nation. She has been a staunch supporter of school vouchers and charter schools in Michigan, so this will probably be on the table as a way to “improve” education as well.

One thing is for sure; it is unlikely that educators across the nation, who shut down the Senate phone lines to contest this appointment, will be asked for their opinions on the future of education.
Compromise

As I write this article I am on vacation and making a half-hearted attempt to turn off the news and put down the text. Regardless of any and all media distractions of late, I am appreciating the power of Mother Nature to rejuvenate and refresh my disheartened perspective.

Reflecting on my career I realize that much of it has been based on learning to compromise. Seeking common ground seems to be an endeavor that is growing out of favor. I am especially troubled by our recent national election and the extremely polarizing effect it has had on all of our citizens. Very few people these days seem willing to consider other points of view. Often these days, compromise is seen as a weakness. I have allowed myself to become a victim of my own stubborn beliefs many times, but upon reflection, it almost invariably got me nowhere.

Please don’t misconstrue my comments. There are, and will always be, times we must fight for our beliefs and most of you who know me well can attest that I usually don’t shy away from providing my viewpoint when needed or standing up and fighting for the fundamental principles for which our Union exists.

There are two areas where I believe a little empathy can go a long way.

First, I believe that our state is so far down the road toward financial collapse that we, as educators, risk having both our professions severely, negatively impacted and our personal financial well-being jeopardized. Of further concern, we are now under a chief executive, Gov. Bruce Rauner, who has demonstrated little support for teachers and outright hostility toward Unions. Illinois is operating without a state budget and vendors and agencies are as much as seven months behind in receiving payments for services. Illinois’ debt is growing so rapidly that one local Illinois State Senator has told me that, by some estimates, a permanent one-tenth of one percent increase to our income tax rate will need to be added for every month that action is delayed on this crisis. Even if this estimate is overly pessimistic, there seems no doubt that delaying a resolution to Illinois’ budget crisis will only compound the burden to resolve it.

In an increasingly hyper-polarized political environment, the reaction by our State affiliate, the Illinois Federation of Teachers, is to advocate “digging in” on a hard-line position of “no compromise” by asking many of you to contact your Illinois State Senator and to tell them to say no to two specific parts, educational funding and pension reform, of this “Grand Bargain” as Illinois Senate President John Cullerton has labeled it. I have spoken with our area legislators, who we know to be supportive and understanding of our concerns, and they believe, unanimously, that change to these systems is inevitable. The resistance to change on the IFT’s part is natural and comes with a statewide perspective that includes members with wide-ranging needs, interests and perspectives throughout urban, suburban and rural communities.

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--LCFT President Michael T. McGue

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districts. After all, who wants to compromise anything about our pensions or educational funding if that can reasonably be avoided?

Our locally elected legislators know what we are up against and would like to work toward an artful compromise. They also know that just saying “no” does little, if anything to create a solution to the problem. When the deal goes down, everyone needs to walk away with something meaningful. Compromise is not a dirty word; it is most often the essential ingredient in successful negotiations.

Having a strong belief, as I do, in collective bargaining, I believe our Union should be at the table to help guide a more deliberative process toward change. After all, we are the experts on pensions and funding and know first-hand the impact of these decisions on us and the children that we serve.

The second area I hope to see more empathetic action take place is on the dissenting political discourse within our membership that often exists after a polarizing event such as our recent Presidential election. I’m not talking here about anyone embracing any political position that they cannot accept. What I’m hopeful for is a reality where we can accept each other. I personally find our new President’s actions so far, and especially his behavior as a human being, largely abhorrent. However, I certainly do not believe the same of all of his supporters.

The past election cycle has, without a doubt, created new dynamics within our political discourse here locally and across the entire country. As passionate as our beliefs may be toward one political side or the other, we share enduring common goals which, I’m hopeful will allow us to surmount any political divisions and continue to bring us together in a cohesive, productive and civil manner, where all, not just a few, can see the benefit of thoughtful negotiation.

It’s time for us all to find common ground through compromise, when we can, and move forward.

In unity,

Mike McGue, LCFT President
The American Federation of Teachers has long been a supporter of teaching labor history in our classrooms. Indeed, states across the country also have enacted legislation that provides for the teaching of labor history in classrooms across the country.

In our uncertain times, where some politicians have made a past-time of attacking labor and public sector unions, it is more important than ever to teach our students about the ways in which labor helped to build this country, and to build our middle class.

Below is AFT’s resolution on teaching labor history and the commitment our national union has to this important work. In addition, you can find resources to websites that will assist you with the teaching of labor history.

AFT’s Resolution:

WHEREAS, attacks on the labor movement have been increasing in volume and intensity, fomented by anti-union politicians, organizations, corporations and wealthy individuals; and

WHEREAS, these attacks have spread to a number of states, including Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan and elsewhere, and have been embraced by candidates for president, Congress and state office; and

WHEREAS, these attacks have been primarily focused on public employee unions, including teachers, police officers, firefighters, and other local, state and federal employees; and

WHEREAS, according to a recent Gallup poll, only 52 percent of Americans approve of unions, which is a new historic low, and 68 percent said unions mostly benefit only union members; however, union households have an extremely high approval rate; and

WHEREAS, research conducted by Hart Research Associates found that, of all adults, 46 percent said they knew a fair amount or a great amount about unions as opposed to 54 percent who said they knew just a little or did not know much about unions; and

WHEREAS, that same research found a great deal of misunderstanding and misinformation about unions and what they do; and

WHEREAS, other studies show that the more people know about unions, the higher the approval rate; and
WHEREAS, Americans said their chief sources of knowledge about unions were personal experience (37 percent), people in unions (26 percent) and the media (25 percent), while schools were not mentioned at all; and

WHEREAS, while there are a number of well-documented reasons for the relative decline of American labor, including intense opposition from employers and their allies, it can be argued that the lack of knowledge or incorrect knowledge about unions contributed to this decline; and

WHEREAS, the lack of knowledge and support of the labor movement makes it more difficult to gain public and political support for its goals; and

WHEREAS, a number of studies conclude that the American labor movement has been—and is—a major advocate for measures to improve the lives of working families, including public education, a minimum wage, unemployment insurance, workers’ compensation, health and safety laws, progressive leave policies, the right to organize and bargain collectively, Social Security, Medicare, pensions, and improved wages and working conditions for all American workers, whether in a union or not; and

WHEREAS, if the fortunes of the American labor movement are to improve, its story must be told and told more effectively; and

WHEREAS, the Albert Shanker Institute, in cooperation with the American Labor Studies Center, published American Labor in U.S. History Textbooks: How Labor’s Story is Distorted in High School History Textbooks, which concludes that labor’s role in U.S. history is misrepresented, downplayed or ignored; and

WHEREAS, there exists a number of excellent programs and curricula about the rich history and economic, political, social and cultural activities of workers and their unions, but few find their way into American classrooms and labor education programs:

RESOLVED, that the American Federation of Teachers will continue to initiate policies and programs to assist members to understand the need for the integration of labor history into the curriculum and will continue to identify curriculum resources and strategies; and

RESOLVED, that the AFT will continue to actively support and promote organizations, such as the American Labor Studies Center, that provide high-quality and extensive K–12 teaching materials about the history and activities of unions through workshops and websites.

All Images Courtesy of Today in Labor History.

Teacher Resources:

www.lawcha.org/wordpress/teaching-resources

www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/green.pdf

www.labor-studies.org/featured-resources/labor-history-lesson-plans/
Nearly 1 in 4 children in the United States live in poverty. The stark changes in many states between 2000 and 2012 illustrate the widening income gap, which reduces economic growth, jeopardizes socio-economic mobility, and increases demand for high-quality public services. This phenomenon affects all aspects of a person’s life and is a difficult cycle to break. Reclaiming the Promise is about fulfilling our collective obligation to ensure that every person has the opportunity to succeed and live a productive life.
ER&D Report

by Andrea Herbster,
ER&D Coordinator for LCFT

ER&D classes have been moving along extremely well and filling up very quickly. After an amazing summer, we began a very successful fall with two full classes. Continuing into the winter and spring, three of the four classes that remain are almost full and will continue on February 21st.

Check the sign-up pages to see what is being offered and sign up as early as possible to be assured that you will have a place in the class. Classes for the summer will be in the next 504 as they are currently in the planning stages. If there is a class that you have heard about and would like to see it offered again, please let me know so that we can possibly include it in the summer. We always try to have something for everyone, so check them out.

Things to remember about our classes:

1) sign up for the class as early as possible;

2) fees (of $50 per class) are non-refundable if you change your mind at the last minute;

3) if the class is cancelled for lack of participants, your fee will be refunded;

4) classes earn you 30 credits for recertification;

5) if you are a member of the Waukegan, Gurnee, North Chicago or Sedol councils, you are entitled to two hours of graduate credit for lane movement; (if your council is interested in getting in-district credits, see Andrea).

6) for others, graduate credits are available from Governor’s State for an additional fee; undergraduate credits are available from Prairie State Community College for an additional fee.

Questions can be answered by the union office staff or contact me through the union office. Any of us will be happy to help you.

Take advantage of this opportunity to take reasonable classes that provide you with the opportunity to boost your salary and your educational needs.

Visit unionplus.org

*Certain restrictions, limitations, and qualifications apply to these grants. Additional information and eligibility criteria can be obtained at UnionPlus.org/Assistance. Credit approval required. Terms and conditions apply. The Union Plus Credit Cards are issued by Capital One, N.A., pursuant to a license from MasterCard International Incorporated. Capital One N.A. is not responsible for the contents of this message and/or any of the other third party products/services mentioned. The MasterCard Brand Mark is a registered trademark of MasterCard International Incorporated.
Zion-Benton Council Raises Money for Local Food Pantries

by Kelly Regnier,
ZBFT President

This year, in an effort to do something positive for our communities, the Zion-Benton Federation of Teachers sponsored a Holiday Giving Contest. Staff members were asked to donate money which would go to two of our local food pantries, Abiding Love Food Pantry and Christian Faith Fellowship Food Pantry.

In order to encourage giving among the staff, the Union sponsored a contest among different divisions of staff organized by department or building where the total amount of money given would be divided by the number of members of a division to come up with a per person donation amount. The “Blades division,” consisting of members of the English, Reading, ELL and VPA departments, was the winning division, with a per person total of $18.04 donated per person.

To kick off the contest, ZBFT members approved a $500 donation from the Union itself. The contest took place during the final week of school before winter break. With a total of $1441 donated by the staff and the additional $500 donated by the Union, the ZBFT was able to donate $1971, which was split among the two food pantries.

When ZBFT Treasurer Deb Will visited each food pantry, the response was overwhelming. One of the pantries had recently received a donation of some freezers from a restaurant franchise going out of business, but had no way to pay to have those freezers moved to their location. The other food pantry was frank in their assessment that our donation could feed many more people during the winter months than they had previously projected. Both food pantries agreed that this gift would make a difference in our local communities, for the families served by Zion-Benton District 126.

The winning division enjoyed a homemade lunch courtesy of ZBFT president Kelly Regnier and treasurer Deb Will on a recent staff institute day. While the group enjoyed the camaraderie of the group luncheon, the talk soon drifted to the contest itself, and what they could do next year. The winning group was inspired to raise even more money next year.

“Our goal next year is at least $20 a person,” said English teacher Christine DiGrazia. “We want to make a difference for our students, even when they aren’t with us at school.” DiGrazia and the rest of the “Blades Division” hope that the rest of the staff will increase their donations and create some serious competition for them.

“There was some good natured ribbing amongst divisions,” said president Kelly Regnier, “but in the end, it’s all about us helping our kids and our communities. We have to show them that we care, and that we want to be a part of the community.”

The ZBFT council has plans to host the contest again next year, and leaders are brainstorming ways to involve students as well as teachers in their fundraising efforts.