



What Does the New Administration Mean for Education?

In a few short weeks, a new president will be sworn into office. It has been eight years since we've had a transition at the federal level and it is not yet clear how our new president and his cabinet will impact public education.

It is encouraging that within the new administration and Congress there has been talk of diminishing the federal role in education policy and returning decision-making to the states and local school boards. However, with his pick of Michigan billionaire Betsy DeVos as the next U.S. Department of Education Secretary, it's clear that the President-elect intends to go forward with his campaign promise to use federal funds to expand private school vouchers (including religious-based schools) and privately managed charter schools.

Using their wealth, DeVos and her husband have shaped school choice in Michigan — greatly expanding the number of charter schools run by private firms, protecting charters from regulation, and pushing for a constitutional amendment to allow private school vouchers. They have also used their personal resources to support pro-voucher candidates, including in Wisconsin, as well as to fund and support pro-voucher think tanks and advocacy groups across the nation.

Exactly how the new administration will expand privatization efforts nationwide is not yet known. However, initiatives given early speculation include more federal funding for charter school programs, federal tax credits for donations to organizations that fund scholarships to private schools, Title I portability (allowing the funds to travel with students if

they change schools, including leaving a public school to attend a private school), vouchers for military students, and education savings account eligibility for targeted groups of students (such as Native American students and students with disabilities).

And, of course, there are other federal agencies and Congress to watch. For instance, federal school meal policy is set by the Department of Agriculture and those rules may change again to loosen up the recently adopted “healthy meal” nutrition standards that have caused some Wisconsin school districts to drop out of the program. In addition, a reputable, nonprofit website focused on education, has reported that, while unlikely, a repeal of the federal gun-free school zone law and abolishing the U.S. Department of Education could also come up for consideration.

On the other hand, long-delayed federal legislation, such as reauthorization of the Carl Perkins Career and Technical Education law could get a fresh start in the new Congress. A bipartisan reauthorization of the federal program supporting career and technical education in K-12 and higher education passed the House by a wide margin in September and could be a good basis for legislators to resume their efforts next year.

At the end of January, I will be traveling to Washington, D.C. with members of the WASB Executive Committee to advocate for public education in Wisconsin. This will be an important opportunity for us to make our education priorities clear to our federal representatives. We

certainly will encourage our congressional delegation to continue on the path, begun with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), of returning decision-making to the states and local school boards.

We'll continue to keep you updated on legislation and initiatives in the Capitol Watch column in each issue of the *School News* magazine. And if you are not already, I encourage you to stay up to date with our *Legislative Newsletter*, which is sent out via email every Friday and the *eConnection*, which is emailed each Monday with general updates from the WASB and state and national news. If these aren't coming to your email inbox, let us know so we can make sure you are getting timely updates and know the status of legislative initiatives.

I also encourage you to attend the legislative briefing by WASB Government Relations staff at the Joint State Education Convention later this month in Milwaukee and the WASB Day at the Capitol on March 15 in Madison. Your advocacy with state and federal lawmakers on behalf of public schools is crucial. As our convention theme says, it starts with us. We have to speak up and be the leading voices in our communities for public education as the bedrock of our democracy. In order to do that effectively, you need to be a well-informed board member.

I look forward to seeing you at the convention in a few weeks and at events throughout the year. More than ever, we need to continue learning and working together to ensure that public education remains viable for future generations. ■

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