

Districts register opposition to DeVos

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Three dozen school boards in New York State have passed resolutions or written letters opposing Betsy DeVos, President Donald Trump's nominee for secretary of education.

They include boards for Albany, Brewster, Fairport, Great Neck, Kingston, New Rochelle, Ossining, Patchogue-Medford, Plattsburgh, Rochester, Sachem and Williamsville, among others.

Also, the New York City Panel for Educational Policy passed a resolution against DeVos, saying she lacks an understanding of educational policy and that her appointment would threaten access to public education for the nation's children.

Calling public education a "fundamental civil right," Albany school board President Sue Adler said the nation should not put its educational leadership "into the hands of a person who not only lacks the qualifications to fill the critical post for which she has been nominated, but who also has waged a personal war against public education."

Rarely have local school boards been so vocal about a federal decision. "It's not unusual for school boards to take political action," said Gerald Benjamin, distinguished professor of political science at SUNY New Paltz. "What's unusual here is that this is a matter of a national appointment."

In the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions, support for DeVos broke along party lines. The Republican-dominated panel voted 12-11 on Jan. 31 to approve the nomination, paving the way for a confirmation vote by the full Senate.

Republicans outnumber Democrats in the U.S. Senate, 52-48. But two Republicans - Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska - have said they will vote against DeVos when the issue comes up on the Senate floor.

The Kingston school board was among the first to act on DeVos, passing a resolution on Jan. 11.

"We were very discouraged by her nomination, particularly since she has no public school experience as a teacher, administrator or even public school parent," said Trustee Robin Jacobowitz. "She's demonstrated support for vouchers and privatization and doesn't have any understanding of public education, which should be a fundamental requirement for someone in that role."

Other districts' resolutions had similar themes.

Great Neck's resolution reads, in part, "We believe Ms. DeVos is uniquely UNQUALIFIED to serve as the Secretary of Education. Ms. DeVos has demonstrated her lack of knowledge, understanding and qualifications for this position and her statements indicate that her appointment would be greatly detrimental to the education of children of this nation."

Six members of the Buffalo school board wrote a letter to Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, chair of the Senate education committee, noting that more than 90 percent of American children attend public schools. "Ms. DeVos's express disdain for public education coupled with her abject lack of academic and experiential credentials to lead this federal department raise troubling questions about the future of federal support for public education under Ms. DeVos's leadership."

They added: "It might be comical, if it was not so alarming, that Ms. DeVos refused to acknowledge that guns do not belong in schools, citing an obscure example of one [Wyoming] school that might need them to ward off grizzly bears!"

Many criticisms were leveled at DeVos' staunch advocacy of vouchers and unregulated, for-profit charter schools, her financial donations to campaigns whose purpose was to privatize schools and undermine public education, and her inability to answer basic questions about education laws and policies. Other concerns focused on her influence in Michigan's school system, as well as in Florida and Tennessee, and her refusal to sell her interest in a company, Neurocore, that claims to manage issues like attention-deficit disorder through "biofeedback technology."

Meanwhile, the New York State PTA, representing 300,000 members, wrote a letter to U.S. senators Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand citing objections to DeVos's positions on gun safety, the U.S. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and voucher systems as among the reasons to reject her confirmation. New York State United Teachers, a 600,000 member union, expressed concern about DeVos's lack of "credentials or any experience to serve in this position as she has never had any experience with public schools."

About 80 teachers and union activists rallied against DeVos in Bay Shore, Nassau County, on Jan. 19.

Members of the opt-out movement have expressed concern with DeVos's stance on the Common Core State Standards. In a response to written questions from Sen. Patty Murray of Washington, the ranking Democrat on the education committee, DeVos said she would not require states to abandon Common Core standards because that is a state-level decision.

NYSSBA's Board of Directors has not taken a position on DeVos. However, Executive Director Timothy G. Kremer wrote a commentary for the last issue of *On Board* criticizing DeVos for failing to demonstrate familiarity with education issues in her nomination hearing. "There is a great deal of anxiety regarding how public schools will fare under the leadership of Trump and DeVos," Kremer wrote.

He also wrote a letter to Schumer and Gillibrand, noting that respondents to a NYSSBA survey were overwhelmingly opposed to DeVos.

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