



Michigan Parents for Schools

*Parents working for excellent public schools
—for our children, our communities, and our future.*

16 January 2017

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Steven J. Norton
Executive Director

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman, Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

BY FAX

Dear Chairman Alexander and members of the Committee,

We write to you today, on behalf of thousands of parent advocates across the State of Michigan, regarding the nomination of Mrs. Betsy DeVos to serve as United States Secretary of Education. Unfortunately, we cannot support Mrs. DeVos' nomination and ask that the Committee vote not to confirm her for the post.

As advocates for strong local public education in the State of Michigan, we have considerable experience with Mrs. DeVos' priorities and efforts in the field of public education. Sadly, her priorities do not match those of the people of Michigan and her efforts have not been in the best interests of our school-age children. Mrs. DeVos has considerable political influence in our state, and she has used her own resources and those of organizations she founded to enact her own agenda for education here, regardless of the wishes of the local communities affected.

Rather than supporting measures that seek to find solutions to the problems facing our local public schools, Mrs. DeVos has pressed forward with her own radical agenda to remove education entirely from public control. She has made clear her desire to use public funding to support private and religious education and has been openly hostile to school districts governed by the communities that built them over decades. When Michigan voters, on several occasions, rejected her family's bids to allow full-scale school voucher programs here, Mrs. DeVos and her allies settled on the expansion of charter schools as a second-best alternative.

Under her influence, our State has one of the least regulated charter school sectors in the nation. Over eighty percent of Michigan charters are run by for-profit firms, but their books are closed to the public that provides the funding. In most cases, the first and only elected official with authority over a charter school is the Governor. Financial improprieties are distressingly common; one charter management firm founder was just sentenced to over three years in Federal prison for fraud and misuse of funds intended for his charter schools. Many national charter school advocates view Michigan's regulatory regime as one of the worst in the country. But this system did not develop in a vacuum: Mrs. DeVos and her allies have been central in passing legislation that freed charter schools from oversight and encouraged their expansion regardless of their success, or their impact on community schools.

In Michigan's highly centralized school funding system, school operating funding is quite literally a zero-sum game. Per-pupil funding that pays for virtually all school operations follows each student, but the cost of educating students does not change that easily. Schools that add students gain funds faster than their costs increase; conversely, schools which lose students see their funding fall faster than their expenses, triggering a cycle of budget cuts and enrollment

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losses that has already forced several local districts to dissolve or merge. Mrs. DeVos and her allies know this, and have encouraged rapid charter school growth in order to undermine the financial stability of, and public confidence in, our community-governed public schools. Nowhere has this been more effective than in Detroit, where the already-stressed local district was brought to its knees by rapid and unregulated charter expansion while student achievement hardly changed.

We have no doubt that Mrs. DeVos firmly believes that her positions benefit children, but our experience in Michigan clearly demonstrates that this belief is badly mistaken. Removing the public from public education, allowing secretive ventures to profit from our children while being held to minimal standards, riding roughshod over the hopes and concerns of our communities—this agenda has not benefited the children of Michigan and will not benefit the people of the United States.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "St. J. Norton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Steven J. Norton
Executive Director

cc: Members of the Committee
Sen. Debbie Stabenow
Sen. Gary Peters