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BETSY DEVOS CONFIRMED AS EDUCATION SECRETARY WITH VP PENCE'S TIE-BREAKING VOTE

First time a vice president has broken a tie to confirm a cabinet secretary

By Josh Mitchell
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WASHINGTON—The Senate narrowly confirmed Betsy DeVos as education secretary Tuesday, in a vote that required a historic tie-breaking vote from Vice President Mike Pence to approve one of the Trump administration's most-polarizing cabinet picks.

The Senate approved Ms. DeVos in a 51-50 vote, with solely Republican support. All 46 Senate Democrats, the chamber's two independents and two Republicans – Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska – voted no.

The vote marked the first time that a vice president broke a tie to confirm a cabinet secretary, Senate officials said.

It is unusual for a presidential-cabinet pick, let alone an education-secretary nominee, to face the kind of opposition Ms. DeVos faced. But her nomination became a proxy for a broader debate over how best to improve public schools across the U.S.

Teachers unions and Senate Democrats opposed Ms. DeVos's decades of leadership in the "school choice" movement, which advocates charter schools and voucher-funded private schools as alternatives to traditional public schools.

Charter schools are publicly funded but mostly privately run, and vouchers provide public dollars for students to attend private schools.

Critics of Ms. DeVos, a 59-year-old billionaire from Michigan, said the movement redirects money that otherwise would be used to improve public schools. They said students who remain in public schools end up worse off and that many charters don't offer better educations.

They have also pointed to statements Ms. DeVos made during her January confirmation hearing they said showed she has a weak grasp of education policy and is unfit for the job. For example, Ms. DeVos appeared confused about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a U.S. law that ensures students with a disability receive an education tied to their needs.

Ms. DeVos's supporters said public-school students in low-performing schools should have other options, just as wealthy families who send their children to private schools do. They said charter schools often use creative teaching methods and have more flexibility than public schools to fire bad teachers.

The U.S. has stepped up education spending for the lowest-performing schools with mixed results. Under the administration of former President Barack Obama, billions of dollars in

grants have targeted struggling schools, and charter enrollment has grown. The administration also used competitive grants to nudge states to adopt Common Core, academic standards that outlined what students should know in reading and math. But reading and math scores were essentially flat on the most recent Nation's Report Card, a measure of student achievement.

Ms. DeVos said in a statement that while she has been a part of organizations that supported Common Core, she is not a supporter.

However, the nation's graduation rate increased to a record 83% in 2014-15, the most recent year available, from 79% in 2010-11.

Other data show the U.S. ranks among the highest in the world in education spending. In 2012, the U.S. spent \$11,700 per full-time equivalent student on elementary and secondary education. That was 31% above the average of countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, according to an Education Department report last summer citing OECD data.