

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

THE TEACHERS UNION'S PUBLIC ENEMY NO. 1

Betsy DeVos is Trump's stylistic opposite, but she stirs more antagonism than any other cabinet member.

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September 1, 2017

Tallahassee, Florida

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos liked what she saw Tuesday when she visited a pair of schools in Florida's capital. When we met that afternoon, she had just come from the Florida State University School, a K-12 charter sponsored by the FSU College of Education. "I had a little roundtable with teachers," she says. They raved about the school's culture, which enables them "to be free to innovate and try things in the classroom that don't necessarily conform with the instructor in the next classroom."

Earlier in the day Mrs. DeVos had been at Holy Comforter Episcopal, a parochial school that serves pupils from prekindergarten through eighth grade. "They started S.T.E.M. programs before S.T.E.M. became the cool thing to do," she says, "and it was just great to visit a variety of the classrooms and see some of the fun things that they're doing to get kids interested."

Local officials in this heavily Democratic area were less enthusiastic. "It's obvious that the secretary and our federal government have very little respect for our traditional public-school system," Rocky Hanna, Leon County's superintendent of schools, grouched to the Tallahassee Democrat. "And it's insulting that she's going to visit the capital of the state of Florida, to visit a charter school, a private school and a voucher school." (A correction on the newspaper's website noted that she did not visit the voucher school, Bethel Christian Academy, but rather attended a "private roundtable event" at the church center that houses it.)

Mrs. DeVos, 59, stirs more passionate antagonism than any other member of President Trump's cabinet – and that was true even before she took office. Two Republicans dissented from her February confirmation and no Democrat supported it, resulting in a 50-50 vote. She is the only cabinet secretary in U.S. history whose appointment required a vice-presidential tiebreaker.

Since then Mrs. DeVos has hit the road and visited 27 schools. Her first call, three days after she was sworn in, was Jefferson Middle School Academy in Washington, less than a mile from the Education Department's headquarters. She was met by protesters, who blocked the entrance and shouted: "Go Back! Shame, shame!" When I ask about that incident, she plays it down: "There were just a few people that really didn't want to see me enter the school. I don't think they had anything to do with that school. But we, fortunately, found another way to get in, and I was greeted very warmly by all of the teachers."

The hostility toward Mrs. DeVos is curious, because in many ways she is Mr. Trump's stylistic opposite. Whereas the president is a bellicose, brash outer-borough New Yorker, the

secretary is a pleasant, staid Midwesterner, a native of Holland, Mich. While Mr. Trump gleefully defies the strictures of political correctness, Mrs. DeVos approaches them with caution.

That becomes clear when I ask my most provocative question, about an Obama administration Title IX policy now being reconsidered. In 2011 the Education Department's Office of Civil Rights construed Title IX, which bars sex discrimination, as mandating that colleges and universities take a series of actions meant to prevent and punish "the sexual harassment of students, including sexual violence." That prompted campus administrators to set up disciplinary tribunals that lack basic due-process protections for the accused.

Candice Jackson, Mrs. DeVos's acting head of the Office of Civil Rights, told the [New York Times](#) in July that "the accusations – 90 percent of them – fall into the category of 'we were both drunk,' 'we broke up, and six months later I found myself under a Title IX investigation because she just decided that our last sleeping together was not quite right.'" I tell the secretary this is consistent with my own reporting on the subject. Was Ms. Jackson, right?

"Well, she has apologized for those remarks," says Mrs. DeVos, looking somewhat pained. "They were made in a flippant manner, and she has acknowledged that." The secretary adds that "sexual assault has to be taken seriously" and is "not something to be dismissed." That's indisputable, but Mrs. DeVos carefully avoids stating a view on whether Ms. Jackson's assertion was factually accurate.

Understandably, Mrs. DeVos also doesn't tip her hand as to what direction the review of the Obama policy may be taking. "I actually give credit to the last administration for raising this issue and trying to address it on campuses," she says. But as to the current policy, "it's clear that for many people, it's not working, and for many institutions, it's not working."

She has met with advocates on both sides, including sexual-assault survivors and wrongfully accused students; the latter meeting prompted another protest, outside her office. "It's important to listen to all perspectives, and to hear from those who, as I heard that day, have never felt that they've had a voice in this discussion," she says. "We're listening and we're considering what future options might be." Stay tuned.

Mrs. DeVos had a rhetorical stumble of her own in February, when she praised historically black colleges and universities as "real pioneers when it comes to school choice." She now says: "I should have been very clear about decrying the horrors and ravages of racism. I also should have been clear that when I said pioneers of choice, it was because it was the only choice that black students had at that time." Yet there is a contemporary parallel: "There are millions of kids today that are stuck in schools that are not doing justice for them, and I think we need to do something totally different and allow them the freedom to have choices like I did for my kids."

Unlike Mr. Trump, Mrs. DeVos does not relish the culture wars, and her instinct is for conciliation rather than confrontation. But don't mistake that quality for a lack of determination. On the cause, she most cares about, school choice and innovation, she leaves no doubt where she stands: "The reality is, for many students today, they have no choice in the K-12 system, and I am an advocate for giving those students more choices – and I've been an advocate for them for 30 years."

In 2000 she and her husband, Dick, led a ballot initiative to allow vouchers in Michigan. It failed, with 69 percent of voters opposed, as did similar school-choice measures in other states. In part that was because of opposition from suburban parents, who, as Mrs. DeVos

puts it, already “had the economic means to make those choices” by living in areas with better schools. Since then, however, “times have continued to change and move more in favor of giving parents and students more choices, because we’ve seen consistently that too many kids are not being served in the schools to which they’ve been assigned.”

She notes that Illinois, one of “the bluest of blue states,” is “on the brink of adding to the number of states – bringing it to 26 – that will have some form of a private choice program.” Two days after our interview Gov. Bruce Rauner, a Republican, signed a bill establishing a tax-credit scholarship program for poor students – a concession he exacted from the Democratic Legislature as the price for bailing out Chicago’s public schools.

Mrs. DeVos sees choice as a means to the end of promoting educational innovation – including within traditional public schools. “Instead of focusing on systems and buildings, we should be focused on individual students,” she says. That means encouraging young people “to pursue their curiosity and their interests, and being OK with wherever that takes them – not trying to conform them into a path that everybody has to take.”

What stands in the way? “I think a real robust defense of the status quo is the biggest impediment,” Mrs. DeVos says. She doesn’t mention teachers unions until I raise the subject, whereupon she observes: “I think that they have done a good job in continuing to advocate for their members, but I think it’s a focus more around the needs of adults” rather than students.

Many of the adults are frustrated, too. Recently I met a veteran middle-school teacher who said his creativity in the classroom has been increasingly constrained by federal and state mandates on curriculum and testing. Another teacher I know, who wants to start a charter, complains that “it is getting harder and harder to work for the idiots in traditional schools.”

That sounds familiar to Mrs. DeVos. “I do hear sentiments from many teachers like that,” she says, “and particularly from many teachers that are really effective and creative themselves. I’ve also heard from many teachers who have stopped teaching because they feel like they can’t really be free to do their best, because they’re either subtly or not subtly criticized by peers who might not be as effective as they are – or by administrators who don’t want to see them sort of excelling and upsetting the apple cart within whatever system they’re in.”

She continues: “I talked to a bunch of teachers that had left teaching that had been Teachers of the Year in their states or their counties or whatever. I recall one of the teachers said he just felt so beaten down after being told repeatedly to have his class keep it down – that they were having too much fun, and the kids were too engaged. Well, what kind of a message is that?”

Mrs. DeVos is unfailingly polite, even toward her antagonists. In April, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, invited the secretary to join her on a visit to the public-school district in rural Van Wert, Ohio. “It was clear that the school is strongly supported by the community,” Mrs. DeVos recalls. “But my suspicion is that if you polled every single parent in that school, a few of them would probably say if they had a choice to do something different, they probably would for their child.” Still, she believes she and Ms. Weingarten “can find some common ground on some of the things that we are both advocating for.”

Ms. Weingarten is not so agreeable. At a union conference in July she gave a **speech** with the portentous title “Our David vs. Goliath Battle to Resist Injustice and Reclaim Promise of

Public Education.” The talk noted that Van Wert “went overwhelmingly Republican” in the 2016 election. (Mr. Trump took 76 percent of the county’s vote.) “Does that mean that the people of Van Wert agree with everything Donald Trump and Betsy DeVos are trying to do, like end public schools as we know them in favor of vouchers and privatization and making education a commodity?” Ms. Weingarten asked. “Not in the least. The people of Van Wert are proud of their public schools.”

She went on: “Unfortunately, just like climate change deniers deny the facts, Betsy DeVos is a public-school denier, denying the good in our public schools and their foundational place in our democracy.” She answered Mrs. DeVos’s clumsy remark about black colleges with a calculated show of racial demagoguery: “The ‘real pioneers’ of private school choice were the white politicians who resisted school integration.”

Mrs. DeVos’s opponents show no indication of repaying her civility in kind. Perhaps that is a backhanded acknowledgment that they regard her as a formidable foe.