

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

MORE MONEY? FOR BETSY DEVOS, THAT'S JUST ONE OF THE PROBLEMS

The education secretary is finding her agenda hamstrung even in a GOP-controlled Washington

By Michelle Hackman
March 30, 2018

Congress just gave Education Secretary Betsy DeVos everything she didn't want: a bigger budget and a guarantee that certain department offices wouldn't be cut.

Mrs. DeVos had sought significant cuts to both the department's budget and staff. But Congress didn't go along with her plans in the big spending bill that it passed last week, a sign of tensions between the education secretary and GOP lawmakers that threaten to stymie her efforts.

The result: While Mrs. DeVos's role as a crusader for public-school alternatives has made her a flashpoint and drawn condemnation among her critics, she has so far done little to achieve such a shift. Indeed, some Republicans have privately expressed a concern that Mrs. DeVos isn't an effective advocate for her primary cause, which is reducing Washington's role in education and expanding "school choice" by promoting learning facilities that operate outside the traditional public-school system.

"She's someone who's worked behind the scenes for the most part," said Mike Petrilli, president of the Fordham Institute, a conservative-leaning education think tank that supports Mrs. DeVos's school-choice agenda. "She hasn't spent decades being out front, driving a message."

Congress last week awarded the department a \$2.6 billion boost when Mrs. DeVos had requested a \$9 billion cut. She had sought to dismantle her agency's central budget office, a move she said would create a leaner structure, and to cut the number of field offices in the civil-rights division to four from 12. The spending package included specific measures preventing her from doing so.

Congress's spending deal also didn't address the priorities in Mrs. DeVos's initial request. Much of the additional funding for the department boosted initiatives undertaken by the Obama administration. None went to her signature request, a \$1 billion program to expand school choice, though there was a slight increase in funds for public charter schools, which Mrs. DeVos also favors.

Although the White House backed the school-choice measure, neither the White House nor Education Department officials lobbied for it with members of Congress.

"It's unfortunate that Congress has decided to make it more difficult for Secretary DeVos to pursue innovative solutions to better serve students and taxpayers," said Liz Hill, an Education Department spokeswoman. "She remains committed to that goal and will work within the framework provided by Congress."

Mrs. DeVos, who says she is acting on President Donald Trump's call to pare back federal agencies, is hardly alone in seeing her budget requests ignored, nor is she the first education secretary to clash with members of Congress. And some of her broad goals have drawn praise on Capitol Hill.

"I commend her for taking seriously her job as head of a large federal agency and trying to make it operate more efficiently," said Republican Sen. Lamar Alexander, chairman of the Senate education committee.

But she has frustrated lawmakers and some administration officials by pushing ahead with a plan to reorganize her agency over their objections. She also rankled some Republicans last month when she called for Congress to hold hearings on school shootings without first consulting them, according to a GOP aide. At the same time, a fight is brewing with the Education Department's unionized employees over a new contract that the union didn't sign off on.

Mrs. DeVos removed the top official of the central budget office, a step toward dismantling it, over objections from White House budget director Mick Mulvaney, according to an administration official. And her aides didn't provide detailed plans for the reorganization to Congress, irritating lawmakers, according to congressional aides in both parties.

Critics of the plan say the budget office is at the center of the Education Department's operations, dictating which policy initiatives it can pursue.

In the spending package, lawmakers forbade Mrs. DeVos from dismantling the budget office and increased the civil-rights division's funding by \$8.5 million, specifying that the additional money couldn't be used to reduce staff, such as through buyouts. The civil-rights division is tasked with, among other things, enforcing Title IX and other antidiscrimination laws.

Mrs. DeVos didn't meet with lawmakers about the budget until a week before a public hearing where she was called to testify, leading to a rare public rebuke from a fellow Republican.

"It's hard to believe that people have been on the job for this long and they don't have staff that are understanding how the system works," Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R., N.J.), the retiring chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, said at a March hearing.

Meanwhile, a union dispute is brewing inside the agency. The Education Department's union filed a grievance last week against the administration for revamping its contract without the union's consent. The contract, which governs about 3,800 employees in the department, expired in December, and the department said it was forced to move forward with a new contract because the union refused to negotiate. The union counters that Mrs. DeVos could have taken several steps, including filing its own grievance, before unilaterally imposing a new contract.