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**Still up to state
Locals, not DeVos, in charge**

By: Sarah C. McKenzie



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SARAH C. MCKENZIE
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

What does the DeVos confirmation mean for students in Arkansas? Not much. Betsy DeVos was confirmed as the U.S. Secretary of Education by a contentious and historic 51 to 50 vote. In my opinion, DeVos failed to effectively answer questions during her confirmation hearings, and I cringed at her apparent lack of understanding of basic education-policy concepts. Honestly, though, it doesn't matter much (to us in Arkansas) if DeVos thinks measuring proficiency is more important than measuring growth, or if charters and vouchers are the answer. What does matter is what Arkansans think (and say) about these issues.

DeVos' opinions are mostly irrelevant because education is primarily a state and local responsibility. The federal government provides only a small share of Arkansas' education funding (approximately 10 percent). These federal funds support the education of students in poverty and those with disabilities. Withholding these funds is the only leverage that the federal government has over state and local decisions about education. In the 1960s, federal funds were withheld from some school districts that refused desegregation, but withholding these funds isn't a current reality. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the updated version of No Child Left Behind, includes extensive limitations to the Education Secretary's role. Language in ESSA prohibits the secretary from influencing academic standards, prescribing specific goals, assessments, strategies, or aspects of teacher or principal evaluation. ESSA makes it crystal clear that education is a state matter, and that states get to make their own decisions.

In Arkansas, the State Board of Education, and the state Legislature make the decisions about education. Many important decisions that will impact students are being made right now at the Department of Education in developing Arkansas' plan for school accountability. Under ESSA, Arkansas must measure school-level student proficiency rates on state assessments, high school graduation rates, and English Language Learner progress in attaining proficiency in English. For the first time, however, Arkansas can choose what other measures to consider when determining if schools are doing a good job educating all students.

While Betsy DeVos did not have a thoughtful response to the issue of growth versus proficiency, we at the OEP (Office for Education Policy) sure do. Simply put, we prefer growth to proficiency. Valid and reliable student growth information is critical to identifying schools that are getting the job done. Proficiency rates, on the other hand, are highly related to the

type of students served by a school, which can imply that schools attended by wealthier students are "better schools" than schools serving a population of students who face more challenging environments. Thus, information about student growth provides a more complete measure of the impact schools are having on all students, regardless of their academic ability when they arrive at the school. What other indicator of school quality is important to Arkansas? Some ideas include access to advanced and/or career preparatory coursework, industry study certification rates, ratio of students to highly effective teachers, teacher retention rate, chronic absenteeism rate, and student and staff perceptions of the school. We don't have to ask Betsy—she's not allowed to tell us what is important (and likely couldn't)—because we get to choose what we think are important outcomes for our schools.

DeVos is a proponent of tuition vouchers and charter schools, and many Arkansans may be wondering how her stance on such school-choice issues will impact our students. Arkansas currently has a voucher program allowing special education students to use state education dollars as tuition at a private school, and House Bill 1222, currently pending fiscal impact study in the Legislature, would allow the same opportunity to any school-aged child in Arkansas. Any voucher system in Arkansas would have to be legislated through our state officials, or enacted through changes to the federal tax code. Arkansas has 34 open-enrollment charter schools, and there is a legislative cap of 28. When the number of charter schools is within two of meeting the cap, the limit increases by five spots. Each new charter application comes before a dedicated and professional group of educators serving as the Charter Authorizing Panel. The panel makes recommendations to the state Board of Education, who must approve or deny the charter. Charter schools in Arkansas could expand in increments of five schools annually and would only be possible if increasing numbers of charter schools applied and were approved by both the Charter Authorizing Panel and the state Board of Education.

If Betsy DeVos grabbed your attention, please shift your focus to Arkansas. Education is local and your opinions can influence important decisions happening now. Unlike Secretary DeVos, you do have a voice in Arkansas education.

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<http://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2017/feb/11/still-up-to-state-20170211/>