

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release 719

Betty DeVos, and her Democratic Supporters of Charter Schools Draw Fire in Georgia, USA.

*“Progressives all share a core value that all students need to be successful, and when they aren’t, we need to provide more opportunities. **What progressives have lost sight of is the other core value of the collective good.** Progressives are going to have to wrestle with that. I see signs they are.”*

Jeff Bryant : Aug 22, 2017

[Interviews https://www.truthdig.com/articles/charter-schools-lost-support-democrats/](https://www.truthdig.com/articles/charter-schools-lost-support-democrats/)

John Foster from the Gippsland has provided the DOGS with the following news from the USA. As populist, fascist politics and Trump-like phenomena undermine our fundamental democratic institutions, there are warm currents battling their tendencies. Protests have been held by public education supporters against Stacey Evans, a Democratic candidate for Georgia who supports DeVos’s charter schools and vouchers. Jeff Bryant, interviewed , National Education Association vice president Becky Pringle who assisted in the organisation of these protests.

DOGS have reproduced this interesting material for the information of our supporters.

Charter Schools Draw Fire From Georgia Activists

Why Charter Schools Have Lost Support from Democrats

NEA Vice President Becky Pringle says progressives are waking up to the vital importance of the collective good.

By [Jeff Bryant](#) / [AlterNet](#)

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Netroots Nation is arguably the most important annual event in the progressive community, and a barometer of what's on the minds of the "[Democratic wing](#) of the Democratic Party." At this year's event in Atlanta, the headline-making happening was Democratic primary candidate for Georgia governor Rep. Stacey Evans [being shouted down](#) by protesters holding signs saying, "**Stacey Evans = Betsy DeVos**" and "**School Vouchers ≠ Progressive.**"

Protesters circulated leaflets comparing Evans' past votes on education-related bills to positions DeVos espouses. This included her support for a constitutional amendment in 2015 that would allow the state to convert public schools to charter school management, her support for a "Parent Trigger" that would allow petition drives to convert public schools to charters, and her support of a school voucher program.

After Evans was shouted down, National Education Association vice president Becky Pringle took the stage and [demanded progressives](#) "stand in the gap for our children" when conservatives slash education budgets and attack the most vulnerable students in public schools. She received several standing ovations.

Jeff Bryant talked with Pringle about the significance of the protests and the possibility of a powerful new education movement emerging from the progressive community.

Jeff Bryant: Let's talk about what preceded your speech. Many of the signs the protesters carried addressed school vouchers. Why was that?

Becky Pringle: This progressive crowd understands that vouchers are a scheme to suck money out of public education and funnel it to wealthy people like our current Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. This crowd is not cool by that, and they have been long time opponents to vouchers. They have more recently begun to understand the nuances of charter schools.

JB: I've had plenty of conversations at Netroots Nation about charter schools, and we will get to that. But I want to call attention to one aspect of vouchers we should address because Georgia has what it calls a [tax credit scholarship](#) program that people defend by saying it's different from vouchers.

BP: It's vouchers by another name. There are many names, euphemisms, for vouchers. Proponents of vouchers have learned over the years to use different names, but once you expose that, then they move on to different names. They're very good at evolving their message, but you're talking about taxpayer money being used to fund private schools, and that flies in the face of what public education is supposed to be.

JB: So about charters, Stacey Evans was one of 11 Democrats to vote in favor of Amendment One that would have established the Opportunity School District that would have facilitated state empowered conversion of public schools to charter school management. The Amendment was eventually defeated in a November referendum. Is Evans out of step with most Democrats on that?

BP: The NEA worked really hard with our Georgia affiliate to expose what the OSD is designed to do, and we were successful. We mobilized against a lot of big money to send a very simple message that we need to support our public schools and make sure that every public school is as good as our best public school.

JB: Why haven't Democrats always been behind that simple message?

BP: People say, we can't do it; it's too much money; we can't make education equitable for all kids. So instead, we get into these false conversations about other initiatives. We too often adopt the false language of "failing schools," when we should instead be talking about how we as a society have failed our students.

JB: Along with that false conversation about failing public schools, another conversation I often hear among Democrats is that we need charter schools because they offer some black families the only way to escape failed schools. How would you address that?

BP: It is a challenge for our progressive allies who don't see the long-term impact of this narrative about the need to rescue black families, one at a time, from their inequitably resourced schools. But if that story really is true – which we could argue – then what it's saying is that we're going to support and continue to build a system that is still inequitable, a system in which we're going to decide what some students will get and others won't. Also, if the story really were true, in what scenario are the students who get left behind getting what they need? Even if we agree that charter schools are the best option for black families – and we have data that say that's not always true – we know that having these charters puts into place a process where there are winners and losers.

JB: I get what you're saying, that the process of school choice doesn't take into account the welfare of all black families, but isn't it right to save some of them?

BP: Approaching the problem of inequity by creating options for just some families is exactly the wrong way because you're accepting the premise that we can't educate all children.

JB: Does that mean NEA is anti-charter?

BP: We're not opposed to charter schools. We have started charter schools, and we have members in charter schools. But charters need to have specific criteria. They need to be accountable, controlled by democratically elected boards, and have transparency. And – an important condition often overlooked – they need to be part of the system, not separate. They should be part of a system of education that makes sure every student gets what they need to thrive. We have examples of that.

JB: Is that what you mean by the 'nuance' of charter schools that progressives are finally coming around to?

BP: Progressives at their core share a lot of the same values. But we need to dig down into what it is progressives think charter schools are doing, even for that black family who declares charter schools are working for them. Progressives need to understand that expanding charters is fraught with all kinds of unintended consequences that even those

behind the expansions for the right reasons often don't see. What we're seeing is that even in communities where some families have benefitted from charters, like in New Orleans, charter schools are breaking the community apart, and when that happens, the community is not fighting together for its collective good. This diminishes the power of a collective community's ability to demand what it needs for kids.

JB: At Netroots, we've heard a lot about drawing lines in the sand where if Democrats cross, they're no longer a progressive. For instance, any candidate who comes here and is not pro-choice on women's reproductive rights is going to have a hard time. We seem to have a line drawn in the sand on school vouchers. But how do you tell when progressives are closer to drawing a line in the sand on all forms of public school privatization, including charters?

BP: We're getting closer. It's happening. [What happened with the NAACP](#) is instructive. It was not easy because Democrats are not yet united around the issue of privatization, and there are many parents in communities of color who still see charters as a way to save kids. But when the NAACP held hearings around the country, I went to the one in New York. I heard the stories, for instance, of parents of special needs students who had been thrown out of charter schools and sent back to public schools whose resources had been decimated due to the money flowing to the charters. What I saw was a rising grassroots understanding among parents that charters are not passing the smell test, and we have to fight for something better for our kids. So I think we're on the verge of a widespread consensus that the current approach to charters is not working.

JB: What should progressives be for instead?

BP: Progressives all share a core value that all students need to be successful, and when they aren't, we need to provide more opportunities. What progressives have lost sight of is the other core value of the collective good. Progressives are going to have to wrestle with that. I see signs they are.

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