

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release 695

School Choice and Racial Segregation Betsy DeVos Links historically black colleges with 'school choice'

Educational Apartheid and/or Segregation on the Basis of Race Dressed up as
'Choice'

The American President and his Education Secretary had a photo-op meeting with the presidents of the nation's 17 Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Kellyanne Conway was caught sitting on a sofa with legs tucked under her. As one wag noted, she looked like a double amputee survivor.

The meeting was only brief. Only a few Presidents were allowed to speak and they were given one minute each.

More time was provided to the Education Secretary Betty DeVos. She praised the nation's [historically black colleges and universities](#), as "pioneers" of the school choice movement.

"HBCUs are real pioneers when it comes to school choice," DeVos said in a statement after [a White House listening session with HBCU presidents](#). "They are living proof that when more options are provided to students, they are afforded greater access and greater quality. Their success has shown that more options help students flourish."

Her statement promoted calls for her need for a few history lessons.

The overwhelming majority of the schools for black students were founded after the Civil War and provided educational opportunities during the Jim Crow Era when African Americans were shut out of institutions that catered to whites.

Critics noted that the schools were necessary because of the [Plessy v. Ferguson](#) decision that allowed racial segregation, and forced black students into separate schools.

Betty De Vos' ideological view of 'school choice' sparked a predictable reaction:

Democratic [Sen. Claire McCaskill](#) of Missouri called the statement "totally nuts" in a tweet. "Totally nuts. DeVos pretending that establishment of historically black colleges was about choice not racism," she wrote.

Democratic Sen. Bob Casey of Pennsylvania, who serves as the ranking member of the committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, also denounced the statement on

[Twitter](#). "No, Sec. DeVos- the segregation and inequality that forced the establishment of HBCUs is not a model of 'school choice,'" he wrote.

Representative Barbara Lee, Democrat of California, said the comment was “tone deaf.”

To many the intended argument didn’t survive the contradiction of associating HBCUs, born out of necessity when black Americans were almost uniformly barred from existing universities by racist admittance policies, with the idea of “choice”.

“ (*De Vos*)*attempt to whitewash the stain of segregation into an argument for privatizing our public schools is perhaps a new low in her current position,*” said the Michigan congressman John Conyers, who also called the statement “*shocking and insulting*”.

The comparison was also awkward because the issue of “school choice” virtually always refers not to colleges but to K-12 education where, traditionally, students are assigned to a public school district according to their address.

“School choice” is at the foundation of DeVos’s public education agenda. The billionaire education secretary, with no formal background in the field, has long been a proponent of allowing parents to opt out of public schools. Most experts in the field counter that school voucher systems and other similar programs tend to exacerbate the unequal distribution of educational resources. “*These schemes do nothing to help our most vulnerable students while they ignore or exacerbate glaring opportunity gaps,*” [argued the National Education Association in November in reaction to her nomination](#) by Donald Trump.

DeVos’s statement comes, somewhat ironically, as Trump signs an executive order to relocate the White House Initiative on HBCUs, a program that has existed since 1980, to the White House. It had previously been administered by DeVos’s Department of Education, but will now be led by an official who reports to a senior adviser to the president. See further

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/28/betsy-devos-hbcus-school-choice-education-race>

Australians have long noted that the argument for ‘choice’ is a rationalisation of segregation with underlying of religious, class and ethnicity, where criteria. But America, with its historical roots deep in the slave trade, as well as revolutionary enlightenment values and a civil war, can see exactly what public funding of private choice means.

If American public school supporters wish to see where their education Secretary is taking them, they should come to Australia and look at our last half century of educational mismanagement and decline.

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