



January 30, 2017

The Honorable Lamar Alexander, Chairman
The Honorable Patty Murray, Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Opposition to the Confirmation of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education

Dear Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and members of the HELP committee:

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) provides critical services to ensure a well-educated citizenry, which necessarily includes people from all social and economic classes. As part of its mission, to “foster...educational excellence and ensur[e] equal access,” it provides oversight and carries out functions that influence the educational experience of individuals that can have a powerful impact—positive or negative—on the lifelong trajectories of our nation’s people.

At the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), we promote policies to improve the economic security of low-income families and create pathways to education and work. The role of ED is particularly critical to these efforts. One key focus of our work is out-of-school and disconnected youth (ages 16-24) whose educational needs span both the secondary and postsecondary systems, along with nontraditional students, such as those who are financially independent, are older, are parenting, and/or are employed while enrolled in postsecondary education. We hoped the hearing of nominee for Secretary Elizabeth “Betsy” DeVos before the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee would provide insight into her views in these issue areas because she had no documented record in these specific education policy fields. However, her performance at the hearing confirmed what we already knew: she has no experience and policy understanding of disconnected youth and postsecondary issues broadly, and of college affordability and completion for low-income students in particular.

Her apparent inaptitude to run the postsecondary education system should give all Americans great concern. As you know, postsecondary education is important for the economic stability and growth of individuals and the country; it’s important for employers to have employees with the skills needed to drive economic growth; and it’s an important tool to alleviate poverty. Mrs. DeVos has failed to demonstrate an ability to understand the significance of postsecondary education’s role in our society, or the ED’s place in overseeing such a system. Perhaps ED’s most significant role is its provision and monitoring of student financial aid to approximately 12 million individuals annually. We are alarmed that she lacks any financial management or

budgeting background needed to manage the \$1.3 trillion outstanding student loan portfolio—a figure more than twice as large as the budget for the entire Department of Defense. But for low-income students her inexperience would be felt most acutely with the administration of the Pell Grant program, which is the foundation for all other student aid. It has bipartisan support and enjoys broad consensus for its essential role in making college more affordable for low-income individuals. The Secretary of Education must be a strong advocate for this program and the students it supports; Mrs. DeVos in no way conveyed that in her testimony before the HELP committee.

Also of concern is Mrs. DeVos's clear lack of commitment to accountability for the educational outcomes of our most vulnerable students. During her hearing, Mrs. DeVos would neither acknowledge the importance of equal accountability for all schools receiving Federal education dollars, nor recognize the critical role of ED in the enforcement of civil rights protections as required by law. Students of color, low-income students, and youth involved in the foster care, justice, and homeless systems are at elevated risk of dropping out of high school with dire consequences for their economic security—and for our nation's economy. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and supporting regulations included requirements to ensure accountability for the outcomes of these vulnerable youth and incentives for states to incorporate strategies for supporting all students into their state plans. ESSA also focuses attention on aspects of school climate, such as exclusionary discipline, that push young people out of school and toward disconnection. Given that states are in the process of developing their own plans under ESSA for approval by ED, we are disconcerted that the nominee shows no concern for enforcing these critical requirements.

More broadly, Mrs. DeVos showed no facility in discussing a broad range of topics, from basic education concepts, to previous Departmental actions reflected in guidance and regulations, to foundational education law like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The reauthorizations of both the Carl D. Perkins Act and the Higher Education Act (HEA) will almost certainly take place while the next Secretary of Education is serving. It is too risky to have a person so clearly unknowledgeable about education policy in this critical role, particularly during a time when the details of Perkins and HEA policy are being decided by Congress, not to mention when the new laws are implemented at ED.

What has become clear is that Mrs. DeVos lacks an understanding of education issues that are especially critical for low-income individuals, and she is simply not qualified for the role of Secretary. For these reasons, CLASP opposes Betsy DeVos for Secretary of Education.

Sincerely,



Olivia Golden
Executive Director