

**Prepared Remarks by Betsy DeVos**

“Competition, Creativity & Choice in the Classroom”

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--START--

I have a confession to make. I’m a Republican.

Humor me for just a few minutes by participating in an informal poll of the audience today, just for fun.

In our system of government we of course have Republicans, Democrats, and Independents.

By show of hands, how many of you consider yourselves to be Independents?

Now, by show of hands, how many consider yourselves to be Democrats?

And, how many consider yourselves to be Republicans?

Finally, how many of you believe that our education system will ever be fixed by political parties?

If you raised your hand for the last group, I have some bad news for you -- you are delusional. I was once in that group though, and there is help for you.

No matter your preconceived notions when you came in the door, I’m going to ask you to open your mind for just a few moments and consider the case I want to make – if I fail to persuade you, then feel free to return to your current thinking.

Here’s my thesis for your consideration -- we must revolutionize our education delivery system in America. That’s it - that’s all I’m asking for. Open education up; allow for choice, innovation, and freedom.

Now, let me back up and tell you just a little bit about my story. I always enjoy listening to a speaker more if I know a little about him or her.

As a kid I grew up middle class, but my father was a great innovator with an entrepreneurial spirit, and it wasn’t long before my family became part of the infamous 1%.

My husband’s family has a similar story, and together my husband and I have also been successful in innovative and entrepreneurial ventures.

So, I am not only a Republican, even worse, I’m a well off Republican.

I spent a number of years working in Republican politics. I was the Chairman of the Michigan Republican Party, and held a lot of other political positions. I had a lot of success in partisan politics.

And then...I quit.

I don't apologize for being involved in politics, but I did become frustrated by them. Why?

Because my real passion in life is education and learning. And I like to think big about education.

I want to convince you in the next 30 minutes to think big about education too.

The world is full of small thinkers who tinker around the edges, we don't need more of those.

I won't waste your time with lofty rhetoric. I'll be blunt, and since I got out of politics, I have the freedom to be politically incorrect too.

Let's start by being brutally honest about the status of K-12 education in America today. Not what we wish the status was, not what we want it to be, but what it really is.

I'm going to throw six "inconvenient truths" at you.

The reason for this approach is because we will never solve a problem if we refuse to admit it.

- **Inconvenient Truth #1 -- Our education delivery system in America is antiquated and it is quite frankly embarrassing.**
  - Let's take the example of the Model T.
    - In my home state of MI, there was a time when the assembly line for making Model T's was the envy of the world. There was also a time when the American education delivery system was the envy of the world.
    - But if Detroit had not innovated, if Detroit was still employing the same delivery system for producing automobiles today as they were 90 years ago, American cars would be obsolete. Yet in that same time period, our education delivery system has not innovated or changed at all.
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> example- Kodak.
    - The American education system is fast approaching its Kodak moment – you all remember Kodak right?...well, maybe not all of you do. It likely depends on how old you are if you remember Kodak or not. Like Kodak, our education system is fast approaching its moment to either perish into obsolescence, or to revolutionize and thrive.

■ **Inconvenient Truth #2 – American education has been losing ground to other countries for at least half a century.**

- The facts here are inarguable. You can see some of them on the screen, but it's really a waste of our time to even slog through this, it's just plain true and everyone knows it.
- The one statistic I would call your attention to is this: *PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment*
  - PISA stats: Arne Duncan called the results, "a picture of education stagnation." U.S. ranked 17<sup>th</sup> in reading, 21<sup>st</sup> in science and 26<sup>th</sup> in math.
- Oh, there are always a few people in denial, there are a few who are content, and there are defenders of the status quo, but that is an intellectually indefensible position.
- Not only are we falling behind collectively in relationship to other countries, we have far too many children who are straight-up failing. And they are largely concentrated in economically disadvantaged areas.
- And we have too many children in middle class suburban areas that we think are doing well...but that are actually seriously underperforming.
- The truth is that each and every child deserves the opportunity to fully develop their potential, and collectively, our country will not be competitive unless all kids have opportunity.

■ **Inconvenient Truth #3 -- We are stuck in a partisan rut. The political parties are dead ends when it comes to education revolution.**

As long as we think political parties might solve the problem, it will never be solved.

Oddly enough – Education choice is very unique in that some conservative Republicans and some liberal Democrats are actually on the same wave length.

For instance, John Boehner, Jeb Bush, Condi Rice, and Bobby Jindal are examples of Republican leaders who actually are willing to lead positively on this issue.

And on the Democrat side, Mike McCurry, Diane Feinstein, Cory Booker and Andrew Cuomo....are willing to buck their party leaders. And believe it or not, Democrats have led school choice efforts in AZ, GA, FL, NC, and OK.

But those are exceptions. The vast majority of the political class is committed to defending and protecting the status quo.

Now, let me get politically incorrect in discussing the political parties.

Let's start with Republicans. Many Republicans in the suburbs like the idea of education choice as a concept...right up until it means that poor kids from the inner city might invade their schools. That's when you will hear the sentiment – "well...it's not really a great idea to have

poor minority kids coming to our good suburban schools.” Although they will never actually say those words aloud.

In my home state of Michigan, one of our Republican legislators who everyone assumed was a supporter of education choice in fact came out against even the minor step of “public school choice”. His reason was that his district bordered the city of Detroit. Enough said.

And just last year we saw Republicans in Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Mississippi taking the lead in killing various education choice measures, all in deep red states.

And now let’s talk about Democrats...many Democrats love the idea of providing equal opportunity...right up until the moment when the teachers union leaders say “no”. When that happens, they salute and fall back into formation.

- I’ve had many conversations with Democrat politicians who know in their heart of hearts that education choice is the right thing, but who admit in private that they cannot afford to get crossed up with the teachers unions and the party bosses.

It’s a perfect recipe for an intractable political standoff.

Meanwhile, America falls further behind, too many kids are denied an opportunity, too many kids get substandard educations, the status quo remains, change is thwarted, and everyone loses.

Let me give you a real world example of what I’m talking about, and I would like you to think about this as if we were talking about your own children. Here are your 2 choices.

Alpha School is a high-performing school, with graduation rates ranging from 70-90%, depending on the year.

Beta School is a low-performing school, with graduation rates hovering around 50%.

If you were given the choice between Alpha School and Beta School for your children, which would you choose?

If you chose Alpha School, then in Washington DC you chose a private or charter school for your kids.

If you chose Beta School, then in Washington DC you chose the traditional public school.

If you want to risk sending your kids to a failing school, that is certainly your choice, but why would you deny the high performing “Alpha School” choice to anyone else?

And yet, our President has tried to terminate these options in Washington DC. ....while at the same time he sends his daughters to an elite private school. It's illogical, it's hypocritical, and frankly it's immoral.

■ **Inconvenient Truth # 4. Government really sucks.** And it doesn't matter which party is in power. Having been around politics and government my entire adult life, I have a five observations about government for you:

- Government tends to believe in top down solutions and government fears of bottom up solutions.
- Government tends to stifle innovation and it abhors improvisation. Any good military strategist will tell you that a battle plan rarely survives past the first engagement. After that, you have to improvise to survive and to win.
- Government tends to favor one size fits all solutions handed down from central command.
- Government likes committees...a lot. Committees kill all the really good ideas and generally all the really bad ideas. They produce middle ground mush.
- Government prefers control and tightly-defined systems. It fears entrepreneurs, open systems, and crowd sourcing. All of which they find threatening.

■ **Inconvenient Truth #5 -- We don't pay teachers enough, and we don't fire teachers enough.**

In that one sentence, I have raised the ire of both the Republican and Democrat political establishments.

The Republicans don't want to pay our best teachers enough, and the Democrats don't want to reform tenure laws. It's another partisan standoff.

But I am willing to bet that every one of you had one or more teachers who made a big difference in your life, who opened your eyes to possibilities and to opportunities. You probably recall them in your mind's eye right now.

And likewise, I am pretty sure that every one of you had one or more teachers who should not have been teaching. That doesn't mean they were bad people, or maybe they were, but regardless, they weren't any good at teaching. You are probably thinking of those teachers right now.

And by the way, teaching is hard. It takes a lot of skill. Not everyone who tries can do it well. We need to admit that and act accordingly.

We should reward and respect great teachers by paying them more, and we should stop rewarding seniority over effectiveness.

Political parties will not fix this. Republicans don't want to pay teachers enough, and Democrats don't want to reform tenure laws. It's another partisan standoff.

The status quo remains.

- **Lastly, Inconvenient Truth #6 -- In America we do NOT provide equal educational opportunity to our kids.** This one is the worst of the worst.

How many here believe that every child deserves an equal opportunity for a quality education?

Good. But that concept is a myth in America today. We don't provide anything of the sort, not even close.

If you live in an area with quality public schools, you can most likely get a reasonable education. In most cases this means you do not live in an economically depressed area.

If you don't live in an area with good public schools, you can move to a different place, if you have the financial means to do so. If you don't, you're screwed.

If your local public schools aren't very good, but you have the cash, you can send your kids to a higher-performing private school. But, if you don't have the financial resources, you are again screwed.

It is not defensible that today you can predict educational outcomes by the zip code in which someone lives.

Defenders of the status quo tell you to wait and be patient, that things are improving, and that things will really improve if they can just get some more money.

Really? If money was the answer we would not have a problem. And just think how incredibly arrogant it is to say to the mom of a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader – just wait, it will get better. No, her 3<sup>rd</sup> grader will only grow up once. There is no time to wait.

And as we know, too many politicians and too many leaders from within the education system oppose education choice, but they use it for their own families. As my good friend Howard Fuller says – “If choice is so bad, why don't YOU give it up for YOUR family?”

For many defenders of the status quo, it's not their ideology that bothers me, it's their complete hypocrisy that I can't stomach.

We do not have equal educational opportunity in America. This is not just an inconvenient truth, it is immoral.

Don't worry about well-off people, they'll find a way to get a good education for their children. But if "the least of these" are denied an equal opportunity - and they are - then our education industry is failing - and it is.

SO ... how should equal opportunity in education look?

- First -- Let the education dollars follow each child, instead of forcing the child to follow the dollars. This is pretty straightforward. And it's how you go from a closed system to an open system that encourages innovation. People deserve choices and options.
- Let's hear from Denisha Merriweather, a student that got an opportunity through the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program.... **[VIDEO]**
  
- So, Denisha's story is compelling – I think we can all agree on that. Thinking about her, and millions of others like her, what would an open system of choices look like?
  - Traditional public schools
  - Public school choice
  - Charter schools
  - Virtual schools and online learning
  - Private and Parochial schools.
  - Home school
  - Course choice
  - Blended options of all the above
  - And perhaps most importantly, new approaches to learning that have yet to be imagined or developed
  
- Let's talk about a few examples of new thinking and approaches to learning that should be embraced...but that the status quo finds terrifying.
  - Khan Academy
    - You can hear more from Sal Khan tomorrow, but his simple approach puts the emphasis on mastery of concepts, and it has far-reaching implications for an open system.
  - Hole in the Wall Experiment and School in the Cloud
    - Dr. Sugata Mitra , winner of the 2013 TED Prize, demonstrates that all children, even those with no formal training, and from some of the most impoverished communities, can self-organize and self-learn
  - José Urbina López Primary School
    - Teacher Juárez Correa applied some of the principles from Dr. Mitra's research to his classroom in Matamoros, Mexico, and the results were breathtaking. - including one student who went from being a bored, uninterested, average student to becoming recognized as a mathematical whiz.
  - KIPP Academies, Success Academies in Harlem, and Hope Academies in Milwaukee.
  - Cristo Rey Schools

- The Cristo Rey Network has 28 high schools that serve urban and low-income families. The school partners with local businesses who help pay for tuition through providing real life professional opportunities and training for students.
- West Michigan Aviation Academy
  - A personal example in that my husband founded this charter high school focused on aviation. ....and yes, a bunch of those kids are from the inner city, and yes, a number of them get their private pilots license while getting their high school education.
- Acton Academy
  - I'm looking forward to visiting the Acton Academy later today, an innovative, 21<sup>st</sup> Century approach to learning here in the Austin community. You can hear Jeff Sandefer, the founder, speak this afternoon
- These are but a few of the new approaches to education and learning, but there is one thing all of these innovative ideas have in common....the status quo, in varying degrees, finds them all threatening.
- Technology has changed how kids interact with learning and anyone who doesn't embrace that is kidding themselves.
  - Here's a personal look at how technology is changing the way kids interact with learning. This is a video of my two granddaughters....  
[VIDEO]

What can be done about all this?

That's easy - all we need is an *Ed Revolution*.

Change is hard, but change is not difficult. People naturally resist change. But without change and without innovation, everything withers on the vine.

We need an army of big thinkers, of entrepreneurs and innovators, of tech-savvy people who are not afraid of or intimidated by entrenched powers. We need to overcome the political class that keeps us bound to a ridiculously antiquated status quo.

I believe this revolution will be fueled by the younger generation. The older generations are too wedded to political parties, too wedded to romantic memories of what education was like when they were kids, and too wedded to the status quo group that clings to power.

It really is time for everyone to acknowledge the need to open things up in education and to modernize and innovate. We need to think Big and envision the way things could be, and then move to make it happen.

This is not a battle of left v right, or Democrat v Republican



It's a battle of Industrial Age v the Digital Age.

It's the Model T vs. the Tesla

It's old factory model v the new internet model

It's the luddites v the future

We must open up the education industry – and let's not kid ourselves that it isn't an industry – we must open it up to entrepreneurs and innovators.

This is how families without means will get access to a world-class education. This is how a student who's not learning in their current model can find an individualized learning environment that will meet their needs.

We are the beneficiaries of start-ups, ventures, and innovation in every other area of life, but we don't have that in education because it's a closed system, a closed industry, a closed market. It's a monopoly. It's a dead end. And the best and brightest innovators and risk-takers steer way clear of it.

As long as education remains a closed system, we will never see the education equivalents of Google, Facebook, Amazon, Paypal, Wikipedia, or Uber. We won't see any real innovation that benefits more than a handful of students.

Everyone knows that monopolies suffocate progress. We need to turn our creativity loose and break free from the partisan World War I-style trench warfare that embodies the current debate.

I don't care who the winners or losers are in the current partisan political debate. That is immaterial. If we can manage to break free, to open the system and embrace all choices for education, we will be the first to give politicians awards to hang on their office walls.

But most importantly, the next generations of kids will be the real winners. And collectively, as Americans, we will all benefit from their unleashed horsepower.

If you claim you are for freedom...if you claim to be an innovator or you value innovation....if you claim to be an entrepreneur, ...if you claim to believe in equal opportunity...if you claim to embrace social justice....then you have to embrace educational choice, and you have to embrace opening up our closed education delivery system.

Thank you for your attention. I don't have all the answers, but I'd be glad to take your questions and will do my best to answer them.