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# Democracy & Education

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## Liberating Children, or Breaking the Backbone of Our Democracy?

A Book Review of *Hostages No More: The Fight for Education*

*Freedom and the Future of the American Child*

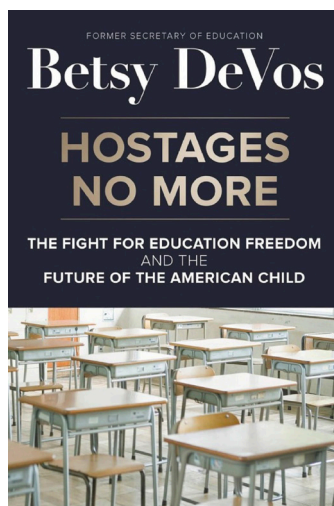
Jeffrey Frenkiewich (University of New Hampshire)

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**I**N *HOSTAGES NO MORE*, former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos provides a 10-chapter memoir in which she recounts her origins growing up in western Michigan, her family life with husband Dick DeVos and their four children, her philanthropy and activism in the school privatization movement, and her time served in the Trump administration, which abruptly ended with her resignation following Trump's support of the January 6 insurrection.

In her anecdotal narrative, DeVos (2022) explains her contemptuous relationship with people who tried to block her agenda, like Elizabeth Warren (p. 74) and union presidents Randi Weingarten and Lily Eskelsen Garcia (e.g., p. 95). She attacks the creation of the department she led as Secretary of Education (p. 37), and she does her best to explain some of the more controversial decisions during her tenure, such as her department's proposal to zero out the budget for Special Olympics (p. 99). She goes after Obama-era reforms related to Title IX (Chapter 6) and college student loans (Chapter 7), and she even blames Obama's Office of Civil Rights policies for the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (p. 164).

The crux of DeVos's (2022) argument, however, is her pursuit of school privatization, including the expansion of government funding of charter schools, a project that looks to weaken public education, destroy teacher unions, and usurp local control of schools. To this end, DeVos parlays an argument that will be no surprise to anyone familiar with her or the debate surrounding school privatization, as she is critical of the federal government's



involvement in schools (p. 90) and showcases innovative educational practices and cost efficiencies she claims are only possible when government regulations are absent (p. 198). She argues the idea that parents and their children should be able to choose a school that provides a learning environment that meets their interests and educational needs (p. 42), and she promotes the premise that charter schools are the answer to America's stagnant test scores (p. 5), all the while framing

the nation's two teacher unions as the chief obstacles in her achieving this vision (e.g., p. 244). DeVos argues, as her book title suggests, that the modern public education system, supported by an "establishment" of government bureaucracies, the education industrial complex, and teacher unions, holds American children, especially poor Black and Hispanic children, "hostage" (p. 261) and that her life's work has been a civil rights struggle to help parents and their children obtain their "education freedom" (p. 216). However, many of these claims are supported with misleading information, and while DeVos provides a vision for American education that she claims will liberate our children, her plan contrarily works against that aim and is better characterized as a blueprint for undermining the institution that serves as the backbone of our democracy (Dewey, 1916).

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JEFF FRENKIEWICH teaches philosophy of education, school policy, and social studies methods courses at the University of New Hampshire.

One premise in DeVos's (2022) argument is her claim that best-practice innovations in schooling are made possible by charter schools. She calls for high standards for every child (p. 123), visionary school leadership (p. 141), a high-interest curriculum (p. 123), active learning with mastery objectives (p. 81), flexible schedules (p. 126), blurred grade levels (p. 122), student apprenticeships (p. 173), and investment from the business community (p. 129). She cites schools that provide "free bikes, food and uniforms, the barbershop, added educational supports for parents, and free college tuition" (p. 138) or "a greenhouse, gardens, and hiking trails" (p. 140). However, DeVos's implication that these model practices are found only in private schools and charter schools or made possible only with the support of billionaire philanthropists like LeBron James (p. 138) is misleading, as we know they are present in many of America's public schools governed and funded by local communities. Just visit the National School Boards Association website to see examples of public schools across the country that are incorporating innovative pedagogy to meet the needs of children (NSBA, 2019). And yes, public schools other than James's I Promise School have organized to provide bikes for students; they have worked with local community organizations (Corazzini & Santos, 2021), and some public schools have even set up barbershops for students (Cruz, 2020; WDRB, 2021). Public schools with unionized teachers can, and do, implement innovative practices to help students succeed and grow, and they do it without compromising local control.

DeVos (2022) also advances the claim that charter schools are more effective than traditional public schools in promoting student achievement (p. 128). For example, DeVos touts charter schools' autonomy as a way to inspire "creativity and improved outcomes" (p. 198); she states, "Students who are empowered to exercise education freedom and make choices have better outcomes" (p. 211). But research on student outcomes, such as that conducted by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) continues to show mixed findings when charter schools are compared to traditional public schools (CREDO, 2022). The fact is that many charter schools do not do better than traditional public schools. For example, a 2019 study of charter school performance in South Carolina found that while the typical charter school student in that state experiences similar learning gains in reading as those who attended traditional public schools, the same charter school students' performance in math showed an equivalent of 53 fewer days of learning than the traditional South Carolina public school student (CREDO, 2019). CREDO's 2020 study of charter school performance in Washington state summed it best, "Not all charter schools are alike" (CREDO, 2020); the same can be said for traditional public schools. Just as DeVos can cherry-pick examples of charter schools that perform better than their neighboring public schools, so too can those who advocate for traditional public schools when looking for counter examples. Note also that student performance on standardized tests is a very limited metric for measuring educational outcomes. Students who perform well academically also need the skills of citizenship and civil discourse, and charter

schools that, by design, self-segregate the population are not as well equipped to build those skills.

DeVos (2022) is careful to focus on publicly funded charter schools rather than the various private school voucher programs that have been passed in recent decades. She distances herself, saying the term "voucher" "sounds like the recipient is getting a handout from government" (p. 195). While she earlier cites Florida as a success story with vouchers (p. 66), her rhetorical move away from vouchers may be more to do with the fact that highly respected conservative policy organizations like the Center for American Progress and the Fordham Institute have rejected vouchers in recent years. The Center for American Progress estimated that students in voucher programs miss out on the equivalent of "more than one-third of a year of classroom learning" (Boser et al., 2018), and the Fordham Institute found, "Students who use vouchers to attend private schools have fared worse academically compared to their closely matched peers attending public schools" (Carey, 2017). In short, funneling public monies to private schools has not produced the results that advocates for vouchers have touted.

In line with her misleading claims about the superior academic performance of America's charter schools, DeVos (2022) celebrates the "cost-effective" nature of those schools (p. 127) but shows no understanding of the factors that contribute to student achievement, specifically identification of special education needs and the presence of poverty in the community. To support her claim, DeVos cites a study that samples charter schools in eight U.S. cities that already outperform the traditional public schools in those cities (p. 127) (as stated previously, schools in other parts of the country produce different outcomes), and as the study's authors admit, "different levels of student disadvantage across the public school sectors in these cities explain some but not all of the productivity advantage for public charter schools" (DeAngelis et al. 2019, p. 11). Given research that finds charter schools as a whole are more likely to ignore applicants with special needs (Prothero, 2018), and as one study summarized, charters nationally have "strengthened their capacity to recruit more proficient students" (Shakeel & Peterson, 2020, p. 27), observers must be critical of these "cost-efficiency" claims when many of the variables in student outcomes are not fully accounted for.

DeVos (2022) goes on to cite the exploding cost of public education since 1975 (p. 203) as another reason for turning away from public schools. However, again she demonstrates no understanding of special education in America's school system as much of that rising cost is associated with the expansion of special education services, a right guaranteed to every American child through federal legislation since 1975 (Frenkiewich & Onosko, 2020). America has intentionally created a public school system that guarantees a free and appropriate education for all students, and while guaranteeing that right has added to the cost of public education, our democracy benefits from an inclusive system of education where all students have access to educational resources and children can learn to live and work together with people of all abilities. DeVos's cost analysis of American education gives no value to these democratic principles.

DeVos (2022) seems oblivious to the costs associated with the segregating effect of charter schools, and we must question her system of education that intentionally segregates society in an attempt to “recruit more proficient students.” This nation has a long and turbulent history of working toward a desegregated and inclusive education system, one that fosters the culture required for a functioning pluralistic democracy, and a system where schools can ignore applicants with special needs or recruit more proficient students does not work toward this end; it only further divides children who need to learn to work together.

Disagreements about the “efficiencies” of charter schools aside, DeVos’s key premise in her argument is that families must be “empowered” to “choose how and where the education dollars already designated for their children are spent” (p. 5). This argument is a foundational plank in the privatization movement’s platform, and it’s a bait and switch. While DeVos puts her faith in parents’ ability to choose an education setting for their children, she apparently does not trust them to run their own schools, as Americans should know that they *are* empowered to choose how and where education dollars are spent—it’s called a school board meeting.

Traditional public schools are governed and financed *by the people*, and those who advocate for school privatization seek to take that power away, replacing it with schools run by private organizations. One just need to turn to stories of all the corruption connected to charter school expansion to see that citizen oversight is needed when governing schools (Strauss, 2020). An estimated \$1 billion of federal taxpayer money has been lost to waste and fraud in charter schools that never opened or that shut their doors early (Burriss & Bryant, 2019)—that certainly is not cost-effective.

However, one of the underlying reasons for American’s turn away from public schools that DeVos (2022) highlights should not be ignored. In talking about school policy during the COVID crisis, DeVos states, “Parents were awakened to their powerlessness in the face of the education establishment” (p. 251). Remember, it was elected officials from both Democratic and Republican parties who chose to shut down schools due to the coronavirus, and it was their lack of guidance that left public school administrators scrambling for workable policies during the pandemic; regardless, if traditional public schools are to remain the institution for educating America’s children, officials must do more to bring disaffected parents and community members back into the conversation—we must do better in getting everyone involved in school governance, so that they no longer feel powerless in shaping their children’s education.

DeVos’s (2022) answer to this frustration is for parents to walk away from public schools. Instead of working through, and valuing a diverse range of public views, and advocating for a process of democratic governance to have their voices heard, DeVos saw the shutdown as “an ideal time to talk to families about having education options for their children” (p. 226). Instead of working to build communities where public schools bring people together, DeVos calls for a system of segregated schools (p. 202) and a system in which parents have little to no voice other than to switch their kids to another school. This is the most alarming premise in DeVos’s argument.

This “shop around” mentality is bad for children, as we know student mobility hurts academic outcomes (Sparks, 2016), and while DeVos celebrates schools with high minority populations, schools like the 21st Century School in Gary, Indiana, with a 100% minority enrollment (DeVos, 2022, p. 132), we also know that segregated schooling limits Black and Hispanic students’ educational opportunities (Reardon et al., 2021). While every student deserves a high-interest curriculum that meets their learning needs, DeVos’s vision for an “unbundled,” “Uber” model of schooling (DeVos, 2022, p. 269) is not the answer. This model of education will impact not only our nation’s children but also the functioning of our democracy (Neem, 2017).

DeVos (2022) goes after Horace Mann as the architect of today’s “hostage” situation in public education (p. 3), but she misses the point in how Mann and other early visionaries of the American education system like Ben Franklin, Benjamin Rush, and Noah Webster saw the public education system as a way to build community, to bring together divergent ways of thinking, and to allow American children to build common values so that they could lead our democracy into the next generation. Have American schools always lived up to that ideal? No! But a system of schooling where students are often segregated by race, class, and privilege (p. 132), a system where billionaire elites (p. 55), not the people themselves, control our schools, does not seem at all inclined to work towards that end.

Public funding of education that does not promote understandings of, and strong belief in, democratic principles and practices is a recipe for the breakdown of our society and the rise of radical ideology. Our democracy and our public schools operate on consensus building; the public school curriculum has been collaboratively developed by communities over many decades (Gutmann, 1999), and an Uber model of education where “any school that educates the public is a public school” (DeVos, 2022, p. 273) does not insulate us from the promotion of extremist values, intolerant and racist viewpoints, and antidemocratic ideology that some would like to instill in their children (Strauss, 2022). In contrast to privately operated charter schools, micro-schools, and homeschools, traditional public schools and their transparency allow for public debate when the curriculum is biased, they make visible teachers who promote extreme views, and they promote a democratic culture. DeVos’s vision for American schooling seems challenged to promote the relationships required to help our youngest citizens build bridges to solve the issues that now divide us; it seems inadequate to building a civil society needed for sustaining our democracy.

DeVos (2022) states, “My mission—truly my calling—is to motivate enough disruption so that we no longer imagine doing education the same old way, because the alternative is so plainly better” (p. 269). DeVos is correct that we can do better in educating our children, but her “alternative” where Americans surrender their voice in the education system, replacing traditional public schools with segregated schools run by outside private interests who have little transparency and little accountability, is not the direction we should turn—it’s bad for our democracy, and it’s the wrong direction for America.

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