

January 9, 2017

Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
428 Senate Dirksen Office Building, Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and Members of the Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions Committee,

We the undersigned leaders of a nationwide coalition of grassroots parent groups wish to raise significant concerns about Secretary-designate Betsy DeVos, and request that you ask her these questions about education, standards, privacy and autonomy issues:

- 1) We understand that your [website](#) statement right after your appointment that you are “not a supporter – period” of Common Core was meant to reassure activists that you oppose the standards and will honor Mr. Trump’s promise to get rid of Common Core. Please list your efforts during your extensive period of education activism and philanthropy to fight the implementation of the standards.
- 2) In your November 23 website statement you mention “high standards,” and in the Trump Transition Team [readout](#) of your November 19th meeting with the president-elect, you reportedly discussed “higher national standards.” Please explain how this is different from Common Core. Also, please justify this stand in light of the lack of constitutional and statutory authority for the federal government to involve itself in standards, and in light of Mr. Trump’s promise to stop Common Core, make education local, and scale back or abolish the U.S. Department of Education.
- 3) Would you please reconcile your website statement that you are “not a supporter – period” of Common Core with your record of education advocacy in Michigan and elsewhere – specifically, when you have, either individually or through your organizations (especially the Great Lakes Education Project (GLEP) that you founded and chaired, [and of which your family foundation is still the majority funder](#)):
 - Been described as supporting Common Core by Tonya Allen of the Skillman Foundation in the [Detroit News](#)?
 - [Actively worked to block a bill that would have repealed and replaced](#) Michigan’s Common Core standards with the Massachusetts standards, arguably the best in the nation?
 - Actively lobbied for [continued implementation of Common Core](#) in Michigan?
 - [Financially supported](#) pro-Common Core candidates in Michigan?
 - Funded [Alabama pro-Common Core](#) state school board candidates?
 - [Threatened the grassroots parent organization](#) Stop Common Core in Michigan with legal action for showing the link between GLEP endorsement and Common Core support?
- 4) The Indiana voucher law that you and your organization, the American Federation for Children (AFC), [strongly supported and funded](#) requires voucher recipient schools to [administer the public school Common Core-aligned tests](#) and submit to the grading system based on those same Common Core-aligned tests. The tests determine what is taught, which means that this law is imposing Common Core on private schools. Indiana “is the second-worst in the country on infringing on private school autonomy” according to the [Center for Education Reform](#) because of that and other onerous requirements, and the state received an F grade on the Education Liberty Watch School Choice Freedom [Grading Scale](#). Do you support imposing public-school standards, curriculum and tests on private and or home schools?

- 5) Through Excel in Ed and the American Federation for Children, you have influenced legislation that has made Florida a "leader" in school choice, yet the majority of students, especially those in rural areas, in states like Florida, still chooses to attend traditional public schools. Public school advocates in Florida complain that expanded school choice has negatively affected their traditional public schools, even in previously high-performing districts. As Secretary of Education, how will you support the rights of parents and communities whose *first* choice is their community's traditional public school?
- 6) [You and AFC](#) have been strong supporters of federal Title I portability. As Secretary of Education, would you require the same public school, Common Core tests and the rest of the federal regulations for private schools under a Title I portability program as [Jeb Bush recommended](#) for [Mitt Romney in 2012](#) (p. 24)? If yes, please cite the constitutional authority for the federal government to be involved in regulating schools, including private schools, and explain how this policy squares with Mr. Trump's promise to reduce the federal education footprint.
- 7) The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires secretarial approval of state education plans for standards, tests and accountability. Will you support state sovereignty by approving the state plans in line with Mr. Trump's vision of decreasing the federal role in education, or will you exercise federal control by secretarial veto power over these plans?
- 8) The [Philanthropy Roundtable](#) group that you chaired published a [report on charter schools](#), but did not mention the Hillsdale classical charter schools, even though they are in your home state of Michigan and Hillsdale is nationally renowned for its classical and constitutional teaching and for not taking federal funding. Have you or any of your organizations done anything substantive to support the Hillsdale model aside from a few brief mentions on your websites? If not, do you want all charter schools in Michigan and elsewhere to only teach Common Core-aligned standards, curriculum and tests?
- 9) During the primary campaign, President-elect Trump indicated that he strongly supported student privacy by closing the loophole in the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), saying the [following](#) to a parent activist:

"I would close all of it," Trump replied. "You have to have privacy. You have to have privacy. So I'd close all of it. But, most of all, I'd get everything out of Washington, 'cause that's where it's all emanating from."

Will you commit to reversing the Obama administration's regulatory gutting of FERPA and to updating that statute to better protect student privacy in the digital age?

- 10) We are sure you are aware of serious parental concerns about corporate collection and mining of highly sensitive student data through digital platforms, without parental knowledge or consent. But the [Philanthropy Roundtable](#), which you chaired, published a report called [Blended Learning: A Wise Giver's Guide to Supporting Tech-assisted Teaching](#) that lauds the Dream Box software that "records 50,000 data points per student per hour" and does not contain a single use of the words "privacy," "transparency" [as in who receives that data and how it is used to make life-changing decision for children], or "consent." Will you continue to promote the corporate data-mining efforts of enterprises such as Dream Box and [Knewton](#), whose CEO bragged about collecting "5-10 million data points per user per day," described in your organization's report?
- 11) Related to Questions 9 and 10 above, there is currently a federal commission, the Commission on Evidence-based Policymaking, which is discussing lifting the federal prohibition on the creation of a student unit-record system. If that prohibition is removed, the federal government would be allowed to maintain a database linking student data from preschool through the workforce. That idea is strongly [opposed by parent groups](#) and [privacy organizations](#). Will you commit to protecting student privacy by [recommending](#) to the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking that this prohibition be left in place?

- 12) As outlined in a [letter from Liberty Counsel](#) that was co-signed by dozens of parent groups across the nation, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) plans to add subjective, invasive, illegal, and unconstitutional survey or test mindset questions to the 2017 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). What will you do to rein in NAGB and protect the psychological privacy and freedom of conscience of American students?
- 13) Through commissions, programs, federally funded groups, the newly passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the proposed Strengthening Education Through Research Act, and other entities, there has been an explosion of effort to expand invasive, subjective [social emotional learning \(SEL\) standards](#), curricula and [assessment](#). What is your view of SEL and what will you do to protect student psychological privacy and freedom of conscience?

Thank you for your willingness to hear and address the concerns of hundreds of thousands of parents across this nation.

Should you need any further detail on any of these issues, I am acting as point of contact for this coalition.

Karen R. Effrem, MD

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Sincerely,

National Organizations and Education Policy Leaders

Karen R. Effrem, MD – President, Education Liberty Watch

Sandra Stotsky, Professor of Education emerita, 21st Century Chair in Teacher Quality, University of Arkansas

Eunie Smith, Acting President & Mary Potter Summa, National Issues Chair - Eagle Forum

Angela Davidson Weinzinger – Leader, Parents and Educators Against Common Core Standards

Donna G. Garner, Retired Teacher and EdViews.org Policy Commentator

Christel Swasey – Advisory Board Member, United States Parents Involved in Education

Shane Vander Hart – Caffeinated Thoughts

Teri Sasseville – Special Ed Advocates to Stop Common Core

Michelle Earle - Founder and Administrator, Twitter Stop Federal Education Mandates in the U.S

Gudrun & Tim Hinderberger - Founding Administrators & Michelle Earle, Co-administrator, Americans Against Common Core Group

Alice Linahan, Vice-President - Women on the Wall

Teri Sasseville – Stop Early Childhood Common Core

Lynne M Taylor - Common Core Diva, education researcher and activist

State Organizations and Education Policy Leaders

Alabama

Betty Peters – Member, Alabama State Board of Education

Arkansas

Jennifer Helms, PhD, RN - President, Arkansans for Education Freedom

Florida

Karen R. Effrem, MD – Executive Director, Florida Stop Common Core Coalition

Meredith Mears, Debbie Higgenbotham, Stacie Clark – FL Parents RISE

Keith Flaugh – Florida Citizens Alliance

Janet O McDonald, M.Ed., LMT, Neurodevelopmental Specialist & Instructor – Member, Flagler County School Board, District 2

Catherine Baer – Chairwoman, The Tea Party Network

Suzette Lopez – Accountabaloney

Sue Woltanski - Minimize Testing Maximize Learning

Beth Overholt, MSW – Chair, Opt Out Leon County

Deb Gerry Herbage – Founder, Exposed Blog

Georgia

Teri Sasseville – Georgians to Stop Common Core

Idaho

Stephanie Froerer Zimmerman – Founder, Idahoans for Local Education

Iowa

Shane Vander Hart – Iowa RestoreEd

Indiana

Donald Bauder – V.P Hamilton County Grassroots Conservatives

Kansas

Lisa Huesers, Courtney Rankin, Rosy Schmidt – Kansans Against Common Core

Kentucky

Shirley Daniels – Kentucky Eagle Forum

Louisiana

Dr. Elizabeth Meyers, Dr. Anna Arthurs, Mrs. Mary Kass, Mrs. Terri Temmcke – Stop Common Core in Louisiana

Michigan

Deborah DeBacker, Tamara Carlone, Melanie Kurdys – Stop Common Core in Michigan

Minnesota

Linda Bell, founder; Kerstin Hardley-Schulz, and Chris Daniels - Minnesota Advocates and Champions for Children

Jennifer Black-Allen and Anne Taylor - MACC Refuse the Tests

Nevada

Karen Briske – Stop Common Core in Nevada

New Hampshire

Ken Eyring – Member, Windham School Board

New York

Michelle Earle - Founder and Administrator, Stop Common Core and Federal Education Mandates in the Fingerlakes, NY

Alphonsine Englerth - Advocate & Founder, Flo's Advocacy for Better Education in NYS

Ohio

Heidi Huber – Ohioans for Local Control

Oklahoma

Jenni White – Education Director, Restore Oklahoma Parental Empowerment

Tennessee

Karen Bracken – President/Founder, Tennessee Against Common Core

Bobbie Patray – President, Tennessee Eagle Forum

Texas

Lynn Davenport – Parents Encouraging A Classical Education (PEACE)

Mellany Lamb – Texans Against Common Core

Meg Bakich – Leader, Truth in Texas Education

A. Patrick Huff – Adjunct Professor, University of St. Thomas

Utah

Michelle Boulter - Member, Utah State Board of Education, District 15, as an individual

Wendy K. Hart - Member, Alpine School District Board of Education, ASD2, as an individual

Oak Norton – Executive Director, Agency Based Education

Gayle Ruzicka – President, Utah Eagle Forum

Oak Norton and Christel Swasey – Co-Founders, Utahns Against Common Core

Dr. Gary Thompson – Founder, Early Life Psychology, Inc.

West Virginia

Angela Summers – WV Against Common Core

Washington

JR Wilson – Stop Common Core in Washington State

Leah Huck, Karen W. Larsen, and Breann Treffry, Administrators – Washington State Against Common Core

Wisconsin

Jeffrey Horn – Stop Common Core in Wisconsin