



HUMAN
RIGHTS
CAMPAIGN®

January 30, 2017

The Honorable Lamar Alexander
Chairman, Senate Committee on
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

On behalf of the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) more than 2 million members and supporters nationwide, I write to express our opposition to the nomination of Betsy DeVos to serve as the Secretary of the Department of Education. Mrs. DeVos's record raises important and unresolved questions about her ability and commitment to fairly administer the important programs and services performed by the Department of Education, particularly those involving vulnerable populations like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students nationwide. Mrs. DeVos has forfeited opportunities, including during her testimony to this committee and her written responses to Senators' questions, to address these concerns and to assure the American people of her suitability and willingness to serve every American student.

Recent studies have shown that LGBTQ and gender nonconforming youth face significantly higher rates of bullying, harassment, and isolation than their peers. This bullying can escalate to violence at school, and also compounds existing disparities in graduation rates, criminalization, and health. Too often, incidents of bullying and harassment by peers are ignored, or even approved, by school staff and administrators. Recognizing this increased risk and the lifelong impacts of school violence and bullying, the Department of Education has provided clear, accessible tools and guidance for schools and teachers confronted with this issue. This information is designed to keep every student safe, and ensure that every child has access to the education they are entitled to and need to succeed.

It is essential that any nominee chosen to serve as Secretary of the Department provide a clear commitment to these goals and to protecting the rights of all students, including those who are LGBTQ. However, Mrs. DeVos's record raises serious concerns about whether she will be committed to protecting the diverse populations served by the Department of Education and if she can serve every student equally. Mrs. DeVos has a lengthy record of supporting anti-LGBTQ groups and causes, including organizations that have been designated as anti-LGBT hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Among the

causes that these groups champion is the discredited, abusive practice of so-called “conversion therapy,” which has been decried by every major medical and mental health organization, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, the American Counseling Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, and the National Association of Social Workers.

During her confirmation hearing last week, Mrs. DeVos attempted to distance herself from her and her family’s contributions to these groups. She did clarify that despite providing significant financial support to groups promoting conversion therapy she “never believed in that.” She also dismissed the significance of these contributions, arguing that some of them go back “18-20 years” and should therefore be ignored. Unfortunately, these donations, many of which are more recent, cannot be so easily dismissed or ignored. Mrs. DeVos could have taken this opportunity to express regret for these donations, demonstrate an understanding of the real challenges faced by LGBTQ youth and their families, and made concrete commitments to specific policies to protect LGBTQ youth in our nation’s education systems.

In the last week, a representative for Mrs. DeVos stated that she supported marriage equality and friends asserted her private support of LGBTQ people. We welcome these reports. However, support for marriage equality and assertions of her private support for individuals does not give us any clearer understanding of what actions she will or won’t take as Secretary, nor does it provide reassurance around the core non-discrimination, equal protection and educational opportunity needs of LGBTQ students. Questions still remain, for example, about whether Mrs. DeVos will support the previous Department of Education’s guidance clarifying that federal Title IX prohibits discrimination against transgender and gender non-confirming students. LGBTQ students and families need and deserve unequivocal public commitments that their dignity, worth and rights will be advanced in this administration.

Mrs. DeVos has also been a vocal proponent of school vouchers, which allow students to use public funds to attend private schools, including religious institutions. LGBTQ students and families continue to be excluded from or discriminated against in many private educational institutions including those participating in voucher programs. Equal access to educational opportunities is critical to closing the achievement gap facing our young people. Mrs. DeVos has not described the steps that she plans to take to ensure that every student receiving an education funded by taxpayer dollars has full and equal access to schools and opportunities regardless of their, or their parents’, sexual orientation or gender identity.

Our children need a leader at the Department of Education who will defend their right to learn safely without compromising who they are. Mrs. DeVos has not shown that she is able or willing to truly rise to this challenge. We urge the committee to reject Mrs. DeVos’ nomination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chad Griffin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chad Griffin
President