

Why is Betsy DeVos taking CARES funding from underprivileged schools and giving it to private schools?

Our nation's public schoolchildren deserve better.

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Photo by Gage Skidmore

When Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in late March, it was by nearly all accounts hastily thrown together legislation meant to address the twin disasters facing the country: the pandemic and an economic meltdown. The legislation contained \$13.5 billion for K-12 institutions that were facing cuts as state governments panicked. All over the country, school districts had plunged into painful conversations about whether they could support the teaching staff they had even as they scrambled to reinvent education across the economic spectrum. The pandemic, notes the Education Policy Institute, has taken “existing academic achievement differences between middle-class and low-income students and explode[d] them.” The money from the CARES Act was intended to help low-income children by narrowing this gap.

But that is not how the Department of Education interpreted the law. Instead they argued that the legislation was intended to be distributed equally among all of the nation's students. On June 25, Secretary Betsy DeVos directed public schools to "share" the billions of dollars in the CARES Act with the private schools in their districts. The goal, she said, was "to ensure all students whose learning was impacted by COVID-19 are served equitably by emergency funding . . . no matter where they attend school." The amount of money that will be taken from public schools and given to private schools through the CARES Act went from \$127 million to \$1.5 billion.

DeVos's directive relies on a twisted understanding of equity. In the Department of Education's use of the term, it means that the money should be equally distributed among all schools and therefore among all children, so as to prevent what the secretary calls discrimination against private school students. But as legislators from both parties understand, equity actually means using these dollars to address the vast inequalities already in the system.

Private schools are insular communities that tend to foster segregation by income, race, or religion. While not all private schools are wealthy, all of them have access to funding streams that public schools don't have. Helping all children receive equitable resources does not mean letting the richest schools get richer; it means decreasing the funding disparities that hurt low-income students. Treating public education as a fundamental right for all children is crucial for the common good.

DeVos's reading of the CARES legislation means one thing: more money directed toward those who need it least. DeVos has been no champion of public education, which she has called a "dead end." She has given most of her tenure as secretary to undermining the nation's public schools.

But this moment is a particularly egregious one. In times of economic distress, school districts are told to tighten already tight budgets. The pandemic is requiring public school teachers everywhere to put in more hours to reinvent classrooms for less pay. Funneling funds that could help these efforts into private schools adds insult to injury. Our nation's children deserve better from their Department of Education.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Stolen education."