



Statement for the Hearing Record

United States Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pension Committee

“Betsy DeVos and the Impact of her Leadership of the U.S. Department of Education on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders”

January 5, 2017

Chairman Alexander, Ranking member Murray, members of the committee, on behalf of OCA – Asian Pacific American Advocates and our 100 chapters and affiliates around the country, we thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for inclusion in the record for today’s hearing.

Since its inception in 1979 by President Jimmy Carter, the Department of Education’s mission has been to “promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access”.¹ The Secretary of Education is tasked with ensuring that this promise is upheld in all of America’s classrooms. The current nominee, Betsy DeVos, lacks the experience necessary for the position having no professional experience as an educator, having never attended public schools, and having never sent her children to public schools. The extent of her exposure to education is as a lobbyist that advocates for the use of public dollars to support private schools and the privatization of public school systems. Both of these systems tout themselves as an innovative solution to provide social mobility to Title I Students, but instead have problematic effects for civil rights.

Diverting public funds to private schools through vouchers will hinder our efforts to provide a quality education for all students. Theoretically, vouchers are seen as a system to assist low-income students transfer out of struggling public schools. In practice, data indicates that students who traditionally are able to use vouchers are less likely to be low income than their counterparts in the public schools, and are also less likely to come from low-performing schools.² Moreover, school vouchers rarely cover the full cost of private school tuition, which limits the utility of vouchers for truly low-income students.³ From 2007 to 2011, the number of Asian Americans in poverty increased by 37 percent and Pacific Islander poverty increased by 60 percent, which far surpasses the national average of 27 percent.⁴ School accessibility is a top concern for the AAPI community and Betsy DeVos’ commitment to these school systems call into question her ability to analyze the exclusionary affects of voucher models to our community.

When schools accept publicly funded vouchers they are not obligated to comply with all federal anti-discrimination laws.⁵ Private schools have the right to deny entrance to students with high-cost special needs like limited English proficiency. A U.S. Department of Education report found

¹ <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/mission/mission.html>

² <http://www.policymattersohio.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/ClevelandVouchers.pdf>

³ <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2016-ABCs-WEB-2.pdf>

⁴ <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/AAPI-IncomePoverty.pdf>

⁵ http://www.aclu-md.org/uploaded_files/0000/0484/nonpublic_schools_discrim_factsheet.pdf



that 85% of large central city private schools would “definitely or probably” not be willing to participate in a voucher program if they were required to accept students with special needs, including limited English proficiency.⁶ Limited English proficient children are twice as likely to live in poor families compared to children who speak only English very well and 1 in 3 AAPI individuals are limited English proficient; therefore, the AAPI students that need vouchers the most are the most likely to be discriminated against by schools accepting vouchers.⁷ AAPI students deserve to have a Secretary of Education with experience in schools systems that have a working infrastructure to prevent systemic discrimination.

The United States must continue to support innovation in school systems to allow increased social mobility for America’s most disadvantaged students. However, the privatization of public school systems and voucher models that DeVos purports as beneficial to disadvantaged students and their families is damaging in a financial and civil rights aspect. OCA strongly recommends that the committee solely confirm a Secretary of Education that has experience with many models of innovative school systems and further, understands the ramification of privatizing schools and allowing voucher systems on the Asian American and Pacific Islander community.

⁶ https://www.pfaw.org/sites/default/files/file_186.pdf

⁷ <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/spotlight-limited-english-proficient-students-united-states#9>