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**DeVOS PUSH FOR EDUCATION “CHOICE” IN ORLANDO, FLORIDA, AND NATION HELPS FEW, HURTS MANY, say Robert Weiner, former White House spokesman and policy analyst Ryan Powers**

***In Boca Raton Tribune, Weiner and Powers argue, “Secretary DeVos’ visit to Saint Andrew’s highlights how out of touch she is. School choice means the rich get better schools and children from less wealthy families stay in public schools that may not be as highly rated.”***

(Washington, DC) — Former White House Spokesman and Claude Pepper’s Chief of Staff Robert Weiner, and policy analyst Ryan Powers assert in an op-ed just released in the *Boca Raton Tribune* that Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos “does not understand the negative effects of school choice. “School choice means the rich get better schools and children from less wealthy families stay in public schools that may not be as highly rated, in Florida and across the nation,” the authors contend.

Weiner and Powers assert, “The Secretary’s recent visit to Saint Andrew’s highlights how out of touch she is with the very legislation that she is responsible for overseeing.” They argue that DeVos confuses “school choice” with “private school,” when in reality “school choice means being transferred from one public school to another.”

Weiner and Powers point out, “For most parents across America, access to quality education for their children is a top priority. During a visit last month to Saint Andrew’s School in Orlando, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos reaffirmed her position that school choice is the solution to the fundamental problems of education in the United States. ‘Parents deserve the right to choose the education that is best for their child,’ she said. ‘Children should not be denied the right to attend a high-quality school that allows them to pursue the American Dream.’”

Weiner and Powers contend, “That is a statement of the obvious. But instead of focusing on policy solutions for children in subpar public schools, Secretary DeVos continues to insist that school choice is under attack. In reality, the U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that ‘from school years 2010-11 through 2014-15, the number of students participating in these private school programs grew from approximately 70,000 to 147,000 students.’ The funds provided for these students ‘increased substantially, from approximately \$400 million to \$859 million.’”

They further argue, “With school choice on the rise, it seems that Secretary DeVos’ argument is a distraction from needed substantive education improvement for the vast majority of children. Her visit to Saint Andrew’s highlights how out of touch she is with the very legislation that she is responsible for overseeing.”

Weiner and Powers assert, “In 2016, Governor Rick Scott pioneered House Bill 7029, a measure that implemented statewide school choice across Florida. In her press release, Secretary DeVos stated that school choice has a ‘transformative and positive impact’ on student development.”

They add, “Though she is correct about the effect of private schools like Saint Andrew’s, she fails to acknowledge that House Bill 7029 has largely been used to help students move from one public school to another. This is primarily because many students still cannot afford private school, even with vouchers. At Saint Andrew’s, a Florida voucher worth \$5,000 covers less than 20% of the total \$26,910 annual tuition expense for an elementary school student.”

They went on, “In other words, she seems to confuse the terms ‘school choice’ and ‘private school.’ In reality, school choice means being transferred from one public school to another, as shown in Florida. Saint Andrew’s is a K-12 private school, which boasts students from over 40 countries and an 8:1 student-to-faculty ratio. No public school in Florida fares nearly as well. Even so, public school is the only feasible option for most families, school choice or not.”

Weiner and Powers provide an example, “Secretary DeVos cited Florida student Denisha Merriweather, a young woman ‘who was able to attend a private school when her public school did not meet her needs.’ She uses Merriweather to explain how school choice is valuable, but conveniently omits how Merriweather was one of few to benefit from the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program.”

They elaborate, “The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program only distributes scholarships for students who meet very specific criteria, catering primarily to extreme cases like Merriweather’s. The primary recipients are students placed in foster care and students with a ‘household income level that does not exceed 260 percent of the federal poverty level.’ To put this in perspective, a regular family of four with a household income of \$65,000 makes too much money to be eligible for the program. For the average family in Florida, this program serves virtually no benefit.”

They point out, “At Saint Andrew’s, the \$55,700 tuition for high school boarding students exceeds the average \$47,507 annual household income for Floridians. Even if parents are able to ‘choose’ this school for their child, how will they ‘choose’ to pay for it?”

They conclude, “School choice is great for the small percentage who have the financial means to afford a top-notch education. Secretary DeVos herself sent her four children to private school and she is reported to be worth billions. For most everyone else, school choice means the rich get better schools and children from less wealthy families stay in public schools that may not be as highly rated. Why not simply fix and improve public schools?”

*Robert Weiner is a former spokesman for the Clinton White House and House Government Operations Committee. Ryan Powers is education policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions for Change.*

Link to article: <http://www.bocaratontribune.com/bocaratonnews/2017/04/devous-push-for-education-choice-in-florida-boca-raton-and-nation-helps-few-hurts-most/>