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**Keynote Address:**

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. WHITEHURST: Good morning. Glad to see you here, see some familiar faces. I know you're here to hear Secretary DeVos talk, but you got to sit through a little bit of me first.

So we're here today to think and talk about K-12 school choice and we're doing that in the context of publicly funded education. If we had this event or an event with this title 20 years ago, it would have been mostly about the prospects for something that did not then exist.

The traditional school district model of delivery of public education was a monolith that completely dominated education through the end of the 20th century. Education within each state was provided entirely by school districts, governed by elected school boards. Each district had an exclusive franchise to provide education services within its geographical boundaries. And within those boundaries, districts managed individual schools that themselves were organized as exclusive franchises within their own geographical student assignment zones.

The upshot of the traditional system was that parents availing themselves of public education for their children had no choice of where their children would go to school given where they lived. A family moving into a home in a new district or changing their place of residence within their existing district or planning for their child to start school could consult an map to determine within which school's boundaries their home was found and know with virtual certainty that the school their child would attend would be the one in whose attendance zone they lived.

Things have changed. In this century we have seen public charter schools, all of which are schools of choice, grow from about 1,000 schools to 7,000

schools, and from serving 400,000 to about 3 million children. We've seen recent growth in taxpayer-supported voucher scholarship and tax credit scholarship programs for private schools. Home-schooling has grown. Web-based schools and coursework are growing by leaps and bounds. And something I'll talk about in more detail, a dramatic growth in intradistrict open enrollment programs whereby parents choose among public schools based on their parents' and their children's preferences. The traditional public school district model is being disrupted.

We've been on top of this at Brookings with something called the Education Choice and Competition Index. Today marks the fifth release of what is an annual compilation of data on the condition of K-12 school choice and the geographical areas served by the nation's hundred largest school districts. We also take a look at some smaller districts of interest, like New Orleans.

The ECCI captures information in 13 categories. I won't take the wonky pleasure of describing to you in detail what each of those categories are and how we measure them. They roll up into four general categories that are of interest to us and I think are of interest to policymakers.

One is simply the extent of choice. Can you just go to a public school or are there magnet schools available? Are there charter schools available? Are there private schools that are affordable that are available? Is there web-based education available? So ideally, from a choice perspective, simply a choice perspective, a parent would have each and all of those options available.

Second, we look at the characteristics of the processes by which parents and students choose schools, and we look at those characteristics against an ideal. The ideal is that, first, there's no default. Everybody has to choose just as you would have to

choose the college that your child attends. There is a common application, so any of you who have been involved in earlier generations of choice in districts or charter schools know you run around, there's an application for every school, they're different deadlines, different timetables. We want to see one application, one schedule.

We want rich and valid information on school performance; that helps parents choose schools. We want a clear presentation of that information so you don't have to look for it. For example, you can compare schools side-by-side and see this one does this and this one doesn't.

And we want an assignment algorithm that, once parents have expressed their choice, is fair. So it's not that you got there first or you went to the school visit and the other parent didn't. It's fair based on your expressed preferences.

The third thing we're interested in is funding. We want to see that money follows students to schools. So if a school is popular and it gains more students, it gains the resources to educate those students and if it loses students, it loses resources proportionally.

And finally, we're interested in how districts support the choice process once a parent has engaged in it and would not have the resources to send her child to a school of choice that is five or six miles away. So is transportation available to schools of choice at no expense to parents?

We don't answer causal questions with the ECCI. We're not saying choice is good or bad. We're simply describing it. I've said in the context of a previous release if you don't like choice, you can take our data and you can reverse score it. You can give F's to the A's and A's to the F's. We stand behind the data itself. It's as accurate as we can make it. And I see colleagues here from the U.S. Department of

Education who are largely responsible for the data sources that we utilize.

Let me talk to you a little bit about the findings from this year's release of the ECCI and then what I make of them. The best and easiest way to access the ECCI is from an interactive website. It's available online. The URL is in the report that you received this morning.

You can do lots of things with the website. It allows you to -- what you see here is the default web page where the districts are ranked by their overall score, but you can, for example, sort on any of the things that we look at. You might be interested in the accessibility of virtual courses. You're going to a district where you want online education, you can rank the districts on that information.

It's possible to just click on -- these are the districts we look at. You can click on a district and get information from the available map.

You can compare districts side-by-side, just as we'd like districts to be able to allow parents to compare schools side-by-side. There's a score summary page and PDFs for each district that provide a lot more detail.

So what can we say about this year's results? These are the 10 highest scorers with the letter grades that we provide. Denver and New Orleans, as you see, are the highest scorers this year. They're the only districts to receive an A. Denver repeats a distinction it obtained for the first time last year, being the first place and being in first place among the largest districts. And for this year it's pulled ahead of New Orleans with which it was tied last year.

What's great about Denver in terms of school choice? Well, it has lots of available choice. Most of the public schools are open schools, so you can go there even if you live six or seven miles from the school. We had the mayor of Denver here last

here, who described how he and his wife get up every morning and they drive their child 14 miles to the public school they have chosen as best for their child, something you can do in Denver and not many other places.

It's got a very informative website that tells you what schools are there. One nice thing that they do is they leave seats available for choice at every school throughout the year. So if you come into the district in November, you're not stuck with the assignment the district gives you. You can still choose a school. If you're dissatisfied with a school, there's seats reserved for parents who want to transfer their child midyear.

New Orleans, through the Recovery School District, retains its very high ranking. There are lots of good things about New Orleans if you like choice. Every school there is a charter school. That is every school is a school of choice. It also has a good supply of affordable private schools that are supported by the voucher program from the state that makes them more affordable. The school assignment process is a very good one. It's based on an algorithm that won the Nobel Prize and it assures that the match between what parents want and what kids get and the parents get, the difference between what they want and what they get is as small as is technically possible.

Everyone has to choose. And they have transportation to schools of choice that are covered through three public transportation tokens and yellow bus service.

We've got laggards this year and I won't embarrass them by putting their names on the board. There are 26 of them that get a grade of F on the ECCI. What does that mean? It doesn't mean they're bad school districts in terms of school performance. It does mean that you get no choice. You buy a home or you rent an

apartment and you know where your child's going to go to school. If you don't like it, that's too bad. Or if there is school choice it's mysterious. It's only for those who know the system and know how to play it. You can't tell how to choose or when to choose or what even if you have a choice. So if you like choice, you don't want to live in one of the laggard districts.

We've got growth this year of individual districts, as we have every year, and we like to highlight the districts that have shown progress. Clark County, Nevada, is a big gainer. They've done that primarily because the state introduced a voucher system, which provides affordable private schools that wasn't there previously.

Camden, New Jersey, showed a big increase in score because they established a new application process. Previously, if you were a parent in Camden and you wanted to choose, there were 12 different applications you had to go through. Now there's one application and it includes all the regular public schools, traditional schools, all the public charter schools, and some private Catholic schools. So it's one application for most of what's available in terms of schooling in that district.

So what do I make of all this? We have been doing this for five years and we have data that goes back to the turn of the century on most of the things that we collect. And so one of the things I make of all this is that growth in school choice is certainly a dominant trend.

If you want to take a look at this particular graph, it notes the proportion of the large school districts on which we collect data in which a parent can make a choice at least by petitioning to be transferred -- for her child to be transferred out of the school in which the district has assigned the child into another school and to have a good chance of accessing that other school. And so that proportion has roughly doubled from

.29 to .56 over the last 16 or 17 years. So we've gone from a situation which it was very difficult to choose in most large districts into a situation which in the median large district choice is possible, though often not ideal.

And this upward trend is obvious in other measures, as well. For example, there are now 10 large public districts that we cover in which the penetration of charter enrollment is at least 30 percent of total public school enrollment. Here where we sit, in the District of Columbia, charter schools are serving nearly 50 percent of public school students. That simply didn't exist, nobody could imagine that 25 years ago.

Likewise, there's been growth in private school choice programs, including public funding of vouchers, education savings accounts, tax credit scholarships. There were 10 such programs in the state in the year 2000; there are 61 such programs now. So, again, large growth.

So there's just no question that the opportunities for parents to choose among traditional public schools for their children, to choose a charter school, to receive a financial subsidy to attend a private school, those opportunities have increased.

A second point I would make is that public school choice is the field of opportunity for choice advocates. We see a lot of media attention to private school options through vouchers, for example; a very contentious issue. But, in fact, private school enrollment has been decreasing over the course of this century. We track in the ECCI in the districts we cover enrollment in various types of schools. What you see here is that 91 percent of the enrollment in these large districts is public school enrollment with about 10 percent being charter school, the rest being regular public school enrollment.

And so if you're an advocate of choice, you have to face the reality that kids are attending regular public schools. And the opportunities for expanding choice are



largely in that arena through expanding the penetration of charter schools and through open enrollment systems that give parents access to the regular public, traditional public school that they're interested in their child attending.

And finally here, a point I would is that choice is a precondition for things happening. It's not a panacea or a guarantee of things happening. Choice unleashes forces that are dormant in the regular district model. It can be competition among schools, opportunities for innovation, different ways of hiring and rewarding staff, lots of things you can do when you're free from the regulatory and union-negotiated strictures on the delivery of education and traditional public schools. So it allows things to happen.

But the same things that allows this happen on the positive side can happen on the negative side. We can see schools competing for students positively by saying we get better outcomes for kids and parents like us more. But you can see schools competing by saying, well, we'll give you a raffle ticket if you sign up to register for our school rather than the school down the street. We can see the hiring of excellent staff. We can also see conditions created in which staff turnover is higher than you'd want, where you'd want your child to have stability in the teacher workforce that that child is encountering.

You can see choice leading to more homogenous schools in terms of their racial makeup compared to the traditional public schools where assignment is based on area of residence. It's possible to have choices and all the choices are bad choices. It's possible to have choices and all the choices are the same, like which McDonald's would you like have lunch at today, that kind of choice.

And I think it's important, from my perspective, to understand that the notion that parents will make wise and informed choices of the school that is best for their

child in a “Wild West” of school choice, in which competing schools have no other accountability than their ability to attract students, ignores what we’ve learned in other areas about how difficult complex choices are and how much support we need to make wise choices.

Few but devout libertarians, and maybe just a few devout libertarians, would want the general public to be able to choose foods that poison, cars that burst into flames, homes that sit on toxic waste sites, or doctors who are quacks. And likewise, I think, we’d want to protect families and students from schools that leave their young charges without the basic knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are required to have opportunity in life.

And so this means that policymakers and advocates who wish to transform education from the traditional district model to a choice model can’t rest on their laurels when they’ve introduced charter schools or open enrollment or vouchers for private schools, choice is the precondition for new systems of delivery, not a guarantee of success. Once choice is in place, a lot of attention has to be made to how parents choose the portfolio of schools that are available, how schools go out of business as well as come into business, and the signals that schools and parents receive on what constitutes success.

The advantages of school choice flow from having the dynamism for a market replace the stasis of a monopoly. The expansion of school choice is not a repudiation and abandonment of the role of government in the provision of an adequate education. It does, however, require a rethinking and a redesign of how government carries out its responsibilities and a commitment to nurturing schools that promote the improvement of kids, their success in life, and that give us an opportunity to learn through

experience as we move forward.

That concludes this portion of the program and now we move to the exciting portion of the program for me and I'm sure for you. The remainder of the event focuses on Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. She's the 11th U.S. Secretary of Education. I looked back on Google yesterday to see who the other 10 were and was a little depressed because it's a sign of my age that I have known and had something between a passing acquaintance and rich history with seven of the people who've held that position. (Laughter) And I'm proud now to be able to add Secretary DeVos to that list.

At the time of her nomination to be Secretary, which she told me earlier today the whole process was a great surprise to her, you know, it was the day after the election and somebody said have you ever thought about the job? At that time she was chairman of Windquest Group, which is a Michigan-based privately held investment management firm. I was trying to get some biographical information here that wasn't the standard stuff, so I thought, well, you know, if you own firm, what you invest in provides some indication of what interests you, as well as how you might make money because it is a firm. So I looked at what turned out to be a very diverse portfolio of projects.

They included, for example, a wine and food restaurant that looked just yummy to me. The next time I'm in Grand Rapids, I think I'll try it. A chain of neurofeedback centers that treat problems such as anxiety and sleep disorders; a venture capital firm; and on the nonprofit side, an entity that funds arts events in her hometown of Grand Rapids.

She's been active in Republican politics since college. She was elected chairman of the Michigan Republican Party four times. Her political involvement has

spanned 30 years, includes numerous leadership roles with campaigns, party organizations, and political action committees.

Another way you can get a sense of a person is see which organizations they are affiliated with. She's served on a number of national boards, including the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts here in Washington; the Foundation for Excellence in Education -- that's the education reform organization that Jeb Bush founded; Kids Hope USA, it's a national organization that facilitates mentoring relationships with at-risk children through church-school partnerships; the American Federation for Children, which is a national advocacy organization that promotes school choice with a specific focus on school vouchers, scholarship tax credit programs, and education savings accounts.

She's a graduate of Holland Christian High School and Calvin College. She and her husband, Dick, have four children and five grandchildren.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Betsy DeVos, U.S. Secretary of Education. (Applause)

SECRETARY DeVOS: Is it okay if I close your computer here?

MR. WHITEHURST: Yes.

SECRETARY DeVOS: Yeah? Okay. Well, good morning, everyone. Thank you, Russ, for that kind introduction and for a little tour through Grand Rapids and some of my previous interests. And thank you for your work to develop this important report. And thank you all here for coming today.

This report does focus on something everyone here knows I'm passionate about: increasing education options for parents and students. It's something I view as a fundamental right too long denied to too many kids.

My views on this were shaped early on in my time as a mother when my

oldest son Rick, who will be 35 next week -- it's amazing to me that that's the case -- but when he was going to kindergarten I became involved with a small school in the heart of our city called The Potter's House. It's a Christian school that serves low-income families from a very ethnically and racially diverse population. And my husband Dick and I knew that we were going to be able to send our children and educate our children in the way that we felt best for them and make that choice, and I realized when getting involved with The Potter's House that all of the families there were really struggling to have their children be able to attend that school. And for every family there, there were probably 10 or 20 families that would have loved to have had their children there.

So I got involved with the school directly at that time and we supported the school and still do financially. But I became convicted of the notion that all parents should be able to make the same kind of choices that Dick and I have been able to make for our children and that, presumably, our children are going to be able to make for our young grandchildren. So it drove me to getting involved, first starting very locally, as I said, in Grand Rapids, but then statewide in Michigan, and then, ultimately, to a multistate effort nationally.

I really believe that public policy is ultimately the vehicle to create more opportunities for kids across the nation. The experience over the almost last 30 years has led me to the following conclusions.

First, that parents know what is best for their kids. And no parent should be denied the opportunity to send their son or daughter to a school where they feel confident he or she is going to learn in safe and learning and growing environment.

Second, good teachers know what's best for the students in their classrooms. Teachers deserve more respect than many give them and more

opportunities than the system affords them today.

And third, state and local leaders are best equipped to address the unique challenges and opportunities they face, not the federal government. Locally driven innovation and customization is far more likely to generate meaningful results than top-down mandates will.

I am in favor of increased choice, but I'm not in favor of any one form of choice over another. I'm simply in favor of giving parents more and better options to find an environment that will set their child up for success. I'm opposed to any parent feeling trapped or, worse yet, feeling like they can't offer their child the education they wish they could. It shouldn't matter what type of school a student attends so long as the school is the right fit for that student.

Our nation's commitment is to provide a quality education to every child to serve the greater public common good. Accordingly, we must shift the paradigm to think about education funding as investments made in individual children, not in institutions or buildings. Let me say that again. I believe we must change the way we think about funding education and invest in children, not in buildings.

There's no perfect, one-size-fits-all system of education. A magnet school is not inherently better than a traditional school nor is education at a private school inherently better than education at a charter school. Similarly, there's no one delivery mechanism of education choice. Open enrollment, tax credits, home schools, magnets, charters, virtual schools, education savings accounts, and choices not yet even developed all have their place. But no single one of these is always the right delivery method for each child.

Policymakers at every level of government would do well to maintain a

humble acknowledgement of these facts. Let's put aside the politics of the adults and actually focus on what will best serve kids.

And that's what brings us here today. Too much of the conversation on education loses sight of the thing that matters most: the individual child. This report sheds light on how districts are providing choices and information to parents and opportunities to students.

The study is important and unique because it's very parent-centric. Parents are the primary point of accountability. The report makes the distinction that simply having a choice program is not enough. It must be accessible, transparent, and accountable to those who need it most.

I'm glad that Russ highlighted the districts like Mobile, Alabama, that nominally provide choice, but don't give parents adequate tools to take advantage of the program. As a parent you can't take advantage of a choice you don't even know exists. We need to find ways of better connecting citizens to the information they need.

The report notes that Mobile is not alone. Twenty-six other districts, as Russ mentioned, nearly a quarter of those surveyed, receive a letter grade of F on the report's scale, meaning they provide few to no tangible school options. So there's clearly a long way to go for many, and I'm hopeful this report helps light a fire under them to better serve students.

And while we may be tempted to emulate cities with a higher grade, I would urge a careful look. The two highest scoring districts, Denver and New Orleans, both receive A's, but they arrive there in very different ways.

New Orleans provides a large number of choices to parents. All of its public schools are charters, there's a good supply of affordable private schools, and the

state provides vouchers to low-income students to attend private schools if they choose. Combined with its easy-to-use common application, New Orleans' sophisticated matching system maximizes parental preference and school assignment.

Meanwhile, Denver scored well because of the single application process for both charter and traditional public schools, as well as a website that allows parents to make side-by-side comparisons of schools. But the simple process masks the limited choices there.

Russ has mentioned this, but I think it's worth repeating that even though a district may place well on the competition index, the letter grade does not necessarily reflect the state of education within that district.

The benefits of making options "accessible" are cancelled out when you don't have a full menu of options. Choice without accessibility doesn't matter just like accessibility without choices doesn't matter. Neither scenario ultimately benefits students.

Consider Chicago. Chicago received a B on the index and improved its score because it now includes data on student growth on its website. While this is all well and good, we cannot pretend that Chicago's education is "above average" for the tens of thousands of students being left behind.

One example is Marilyn Rhames and her daughter. Some of you may have read Marilyn's firsthand account. When Marilyn taught at their neighborhood school, she enrolled her oldest daughter there to remind her to treat each of her students like they were one of her own kids. When she tried to raise objections with the school as a parent, she was fired as a teacher. So she took a job at a charter school and brought her daughter with her.



Marilyn's oldest daughter graduated from the charter school, but her youngest daughter was struggling. She considered the neighborhood school again, but that school failed to meet the family's needs.

Marilyn finally found an independent, classical private school that she says could celebrate her daughter's heritage while instilling the academic discipline needed to succeed. Marilyn wrote that while she may wish her tax dollars went to a rigorous district school that could fit her child's needs, the fact is they simply haven't. In her own words, and I quote, "Siding with my child is an unalienable right. My only real school choice right now is private."

For Marilyn, there was really only one choice to meet her daughter's needs. The index may have given Chicago a B, but can we really claim that Marilyn had plenty of quality options?

Separately, the report argues that, "There is no question that alternatives to the traditional school district model are destructive of the traditional school district model." Many would read this and conclude that such alternatives, or choices, are destructive of traditional public schools and of the students they serve. But I would argue that these alternatives are constructive, not destructive, for students, parents, and teachers.

Let me offer this example from a different part of our daily lives. Let me ask, how many of you got here today using an Uber, a Lyft, or another ridesharing service? A few of you, good. Did you choose that because it was more convenient than hoping a taxi would drive by? Even if you didn't use a ridesharing service today, I would bet most of you at least have the app on your phone.

Just like the traditional taxi system revolted against ridesharing, so, too,

does the education establishment feel threatened by the rise of school choice. In both cases, the entrenched status quo has resisted models that empower individuals.

Nobody mandates that you take an Uber or a Lyft over a taxi, nor should they. But if you think ridesharing is the best option for you, the government shouldn't get in your way.

The truth is that, in practice, people like having more options. They like being able to choose between Uber Pool, Uber X, Lyft Line, Lyft Plus, and many others; or when it comes to taking a family trip, many like options like Airbnb.

We celebrate the benefits of choices in transportation and in lodging, but doesn't that pale in comparison to the importance of educating the future of our country? Why do we not allow parents to exercise that same right to choice in the education of their child?

The reflexive question asked, often politely, by critics of choice is why should we not simply fix the broken schools first? If only schools received more funding, they say, the schools could provide a better learning environment for those being left behind. But, of course, we've already tried that and it's proven not to work. We know because it was a signature plank of the previous administration's education agenda, the School Improvement Grants.

Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said just last year that the School Improvement Grant program was their "biggest bet" on education. Well, he was right on one thing: the size of the bet certainly was big. The administration ended up spending \$7 billion on trying to fix targeted schools.

It's interesting that the previous administration waited until January 18th of this year to release the final results of their biggest bet. The report, released by the

department's Institute for Education Sciences, stated, "Overall, across all grades, we found that implementing any SIG-funded model had no significant impacts on math or reading test scores, high school graduation, or college enrollment."

"No significant impact." At what point do we accept the fact that throwing money at the problem isn't the solution? I'm not trying to vilify the motives of SIG's backers, but good intentions and billions of dollars clearly aren't enough to give students what they need to succeed.

Let me be clear. If we can identify a school turnaround model that shows promise, I want to learn about it. If we find a solution that demonstrates consistent results, I want to support it. But waiting and hoping for a miracle, while blocking efforts that can help millions of children immediately, is simply not something this administration will abide.

The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. That's not policymaking. Neither is education reform without changing the culture around education.

Changing the culture starts with shifting away from an "us versus them" mentality. The focus shouldn't be on whether we have a public system, a private system, a charter system, a virtual system. It should be about the child and what is best for each individual student.

It's important to remember that statistics aren't just numbers, they represent real people. I've had the opportunity to be with them in their schools and I've heard concerns.

Last week, when I was at a student roundtable at Valencia College, one student told his own story and it pained me to hear it. His name is Michael B. Michael

grew up in East Hartford, Connecticut, in a low-income neighborhood. He was an average student through elementary and middle school, but that all changed when he started ninth grade at the district high school.

Michael described a school where students were the real ones in charge of class and they would make it impossible for the teachers to teach. He was constantly bullied and became afraid of even using the bathroom at school. This constant fear made him hate school and it made it impossible for him to focus on learning. He said, and I quote, "It was nothing more than adult daycare, a dangerous daycare."

But even though he was failing, the school still gave him a passing grade, D-minuses, and so he felt like he was no better than a D-minus student.

Fast forward some years. Michael is a veteran of Afghanistan; married with three young daughters. He was working as a bellman at a hotel in Florida. He enjoyed the work, but one day his wife asked, do you want to be a bellman for the rest of your life? He was afraid to try something different, but with his wife's encouragement, he was inspired.

Michael got an A in his first class. He thought it was a fluke until he continued to earn straight A's. He's now in the school's honors program with a 3.8 GPA, and is finishing his prerequisite classes to be a nurse with the goal of working in an emergency room. He's on the path to realizing his dream, and Valencia College gave him that second chance.

But Michael still worries for his daughters and other young children in America. He doesn't want them to go through what he did, trapped in an environment where he felt unsafe and he learned nothing. That's why he asked me a question that fuels my passion: What are you going to do to change the culture of these schools?

The culture he's talking about defends a system at the expense of the very students it's supposed to serve. This is a problem we can't spend our way out of.

We can change the culture by embracing innovative disruptors and empowering parents and students with choice. I think we need to change the conversation about how we invest in schools and what types of schools we invest in to investing in students. At the end of the day, if the finest school building with the best teachers isn't educating all of its individual students effectively, that school is failing those students.

The education debate needs to be student-centric, period. As Russ says in his report, choice alone is not a panacea, but there is evidence it works. It works for millions of students through inner district choice, public school choice, public charter schools, private school choice, virtual schools, and home schooling. And it could work for millions of more students if options are made available.

It's an understatement to say that such a culture shift could be accomplished alone. If we truly want to improve education for children, we need to come together.

I don't pretend to have all the answers, but we should not pretend that the status quo is acceptable because even one more Michael, one more painful story about the failure of the system, is unacceptable. And the reality is there are Michaels in classrooms or Michaels who have dropped out all across this country.

So I urge us to come together to embrace policies that actually empower parents and give kids an equal shot at a quality education they deserve. It's the right and just thing to do.

Thank you. (Applause)

MR. WHITEHURST: Well, thank you very much for your remarks. One of the things I'd like to accomplish with you and with the audience is to get to know a little bit more about where you see yourself as going and what you want to accomplish.

I served in the George W. Bush administration for almost eight years and, you know, the public persona of what the administration was going to -- public face of what it was going to accomplish in education was one thing, but when you got in the private meetings you understood it was NAEP scores on reading at fourth grade; that most of the emphasis in the Bush program was on No Child Left Behind, getting reading scores up so that every child would be capable of reading and the learning that comes from that.

So how would you and the Trump administration want to be held accountable, if not four years from now, at some point in the future when the data would be available to say, well, you did a good job or you didn't quite make it?

SECRETARY DeVOS: Well, thanks. Let me say thanks again, Russ, for inviting me here today. And to answer your question I think I would sort of refer back to remarks I just made. I believe we really need to move from an institution and building and system-centered focus on education to a real student-centric focus and talking about doing things and making policy that's going to be right for an individual child's needs and individual student's needs.

And it really expands well beyond K-12 education because we are having a lot of debate and discussion about what to do about the cost of higher education and the notion that we have hundreds of thousands of jobs in this country for skilled workers that are going unfilled. And, you know, we've done a disservice to young people to not really talk about helping them find their personal passion and their personal niche.

MR. WHITEHURST: So let me push back a little bit. So I'm not sure what changing the culture to make it student-centric, I'm not sure how to hold you accountable for that. So is it a different set of funding mechanisms you'd like to see in place where money follows kids? Is it that every parent should be able to choose? Is it that achievement is going rise?

So at the end I would say I want some numbers or something I can count that shows that you've gotten where you said you were going to go. What would it be? How would I know?

SECRETARY DeVOS: Well, it certainly would be around policies that would empower parents and students to make the choices. You know, we currently have, as you pointed out in your report, a relatively limited range of choices in other forms or other approaches to education. But I am a firm believer that the demand is there. And if the demand is actually allowed to be cultivated, that the response to that demand will be there, as well.

So I'm not a numbers person in the same way you are.

MR. WHITEHURST: Sure, sure.

SECRETARY DeVOS: But to me, the policies around empowering parents and moving the decision-making to the hands of parents on behalf of children is really the direction we need to go.

MR. WHITEHURST: Could you see the possibility, at least conceptually, that a choice environment implemented poorly could have negative impacts on families? Could you struggle with us publicly for a moment on the conceptual horns of a dilemma where you have more choice, but academic achievement and outcomes for kids are getting worse? Could you see that as happening at all? And if so, you know, what would

be the administration's responsibility?

SECRETARY DeVOS: Well, I'm not sure how they can get a lot worse on, you know, a nationwide basis than they are today. I mean, the fact that our PISA scores have continued to deteriorate as compared to the rest of the world and, you know, that we've seen stagnant, at best, results with the NAEP scores over the years, I'm not sure that we can deteriorate a whole lot.

MR. WHITEHURST: Do worse? Well, I don't know. I mean, NAEP scores actually on math have gone up quite dramatically over the last 20 years, particularly for low-performing kids. It's actually interesting that the Bush administration focused on reading and didn't pay much attention to math, and math got a lot better and reading remains stagnant. (Laughter)

SECRETARY DeVOS: Which just suggests that the federal government top-down approach isn't necessarily the wisest approach to this.

MR. WHITEHURST: So let me follow up to that comment. So there are various players in the system here. You clearly want to focus on students and families as central players, certainly the federal government is a player, states are players, local school districts. I mean, part of what a surface reading of what we've know so far about what the Trump administration wants to do, and it's consistent with ESSA, the new education law, is to pass responsibility that had been taken by the federal government in the last 15 or so years and send it back to states and localities. And, you know, I've read remarks you've made that are consistent with this devolution of power back to states.

But isn't that a return to the status quo? I mean, isn't it the traditional school district model, the ability of school boards elected out of the regular election cycle and with most members being representatives of teachers' unions? I mean, so how



comfortable are we with returning power to the folks who produced what you were just describing as kind of a mess in terms of student outcomes?

SECRETARY DeVOS: Well, I think clearly there's a concern in that regard, but I think we've seen in the last decade or so a number of states and, you know, led by a number of governors who have been particularly innovative. And I think we're seeing more interest in following those innovations and in actually one-upping them in some cases in, you know, the next state.

The growth of consideration in state capitals around multiple forms of choice has grown exponentially, really. And I think that, again, empowering the states to be able to really be the laboratories around this notion is really where we're going to see the greatest amount of change and we're going to see the greatest headway made.

I think there's a role for the federal government to play in that, highlighting the areas where specific growth and specific success is being realized. And there's also a role to be played where states are simply sort of sitting back and being satisfied with mediocre, at best, results.

MR. WHITEHURST: And so what is that role?

SECRETARY DeVOS: I think it's --

MR. WHITEHURST: So what is the federal role?

SECRETARY DeVOS: I think it's more of an informative role.

MR. WHITEHURST: I see.

SECRETARY DeVOS: Rather than a mandated role from the Department of Education.

MR. WHITEHURST: Right, right. So if you're faced, as I'm sure you will be and are already, with states that are enthusiastically moving towards more open

systems -- Indiana and Louisiana are examples of such --

SECRETARY DeVOS: Florida.

MR. WHITEHURST: Florida.

SECRETARY DeVOS: Yeah.

MR. WHITEHURST: Are examples of such states.

SECRETARY DeVOS: Wisconsin.

MR. WHITEHURST: With states that you might characterize as complacent, others might characterize as happy with the system they've got. And the result of their complacency or satisfaction with the system they've got is that parents are stuck with schools they don't want their kids in.

So, you know, one of the attractions of being a cabinet officer is, I think, you know, that you can exercise some influence. So what would you do? Is it just a bully pulpit? Is that the only leverage you think you've got available to you?

SECRETARY DeVOS: I think this process of the state plan submission for the ESSA Act is going to be a very good and instructive process. April 3, the first set will roll in; September, the second set. And I think through the peer review and then ultimate sign-off on the states' plans, we're going to have opportunity to comment to what they are aspiring to do. And I suspect that there will be places that we can point out they're probably being deficient in their approach to one of these measures. And I suspect there will be places that we will want to highlight as suggesting that others may want to emulate and follow suit.

MR. WHITEHURST: So do you see turning down any of those plans?

SECRETARY DeVOS: I don't know. It's too early to say that.

MR. WHITEHURST: So you see it as at least possible, that a state that's

complacent with a system that you see as antithetical to serving parents' interest would be given a revise and resubmit direction here?

SECRETARY DeVOS: I think that there's certainly going to be a lot of discussion and back-and-forth as we go through this process. And, I mean, the goal is clearly to implement as Congress has intended, and to really push it back to the states to step up and create and innovate in ways that they haven't done before.

MR. WHITEHURST: I'd be probably considered remiss by some of the people in the audience and viewing online if I didn't ask you about the department's budget. So the Trump "Skinny Budget" proposes reduction of about \$9 billion in the U.S. Department of Education's budget, I think about a 13 percent reduction. And you're doing that by proposing to eliminate some programs, but also shifting money into school choice initiatives.

There was an op-ed I read this morning in USA Today where there's some choice advocates who are saying, well, you know, we don't want you taking money away from these activities which serve kids to give it to us even though we'd benefit from that. And other people are saying, well, you know, it's like the Obama administration with the Common Core. You know, they might have gotten it if they'd left it alone.

So do you see a possibility here of the federal budget and the actions that would follow from that, is there a risk that having the federal government in a sense take a top-down position on these issues undermines public support that would otherwise be present as the states are actively and districts are actively already moving forward?

SECRETARY DeVOS: Well, let me just say clearly the budget's not in its final form yet.

MR. WHITEHURST: Good.

SECRETARY DeVOS: So there's lots of discussion around the priorities, which are really student-centric and funding students and what's working on behalf of students. So I expect that we're going to be having a lot more conversation around that in the next few weeks.

MR. WHITEHURST: Well, my experience was that all administration budgets are aspirational budgets as opposed to actual, so that certainly will be interesting to watch going forward.

I'd like to give the audience an opportunity to ask questions here. We'll only have a couple of minutes. I'd ask you to ask a question instead of making a speech.

So, Richard, why don't I call on you?

MR. KAHLENBERG: Hi. I'm Richard Kahlenberg with the Century Foundation. And I want to ask about the question of diversity and choice because, Russ, you mentioned that it's possible that choice will produce more segregation rather than less. But if engineered correctly, it could produce a lot more diversity. And I know that you spoke at the Magnet Schools of America and spoke about the importance of diversity in schooling.

So I'm wondering if you support or oppose policies that would structure choice in a way to promote socioeconomic and racial diversity. So I'm thinking, for example, like I work with the Charlotte Public Schools recently and they have a policy where with their magnet schools they want to try to get a nice, healthy mix of students from different backgrounds and what your position is on that. Thank you.

SECRETARY DeVOS: Well, I clearly think that having diversity, racial, socioeconomic, any other measure of diversity is a real benefit in schools. And I think that there's been a number of studies that have shown that, demonstrated that actually

where there is certainly a higher than normal level of choices for parents, that you actually do end up with more diverse situations. And I think about a school that I visited in Indianapolis, the Oak School, that the mission is to really have a wide range of diversity socioeconomically and racially and it's been a very successful model that has parents lined up way down the streets trying to get their children into it.

So yes, I would concur that it's beneficial. It's very beneficial to kids to experience a wide range of diversity in their learning environment.

MR. WHITEHURST: Here.

SPEAKER: Thank you. During Russ' remarks he talked about one of the roles of the government is protecting people from defective products, like consumer protection. We don't let people drive cars that are going to explode. So, Madam Secretary, I'd be interested to hear kind of you reflect on what's the appropriate role of the government in trying to balance the desire to be parent and student-centric, let people exercise choices, you know, based on what they think is best for their children, but, at the same time, try and have some amount of consumer protection so that people don't end up going to schools that in some, you know, metaphorical sense are going to explode on them.

SECRETARY DeVOS: That's a really good question and I think it's a fine balance to strike. I think the first and more important measure of accountability to the public is to parents in general. Right? The fact that parents choose a school for their child, I would love to see evidence of schools that are attracting students solely on the promise of a raffle ticket or something, and that a parent would actually end up being happy with that decision long term.

I think parents need to have information about how their child is doing,

and that is, I think, the first form and the best form of accountability. And that information, I think, needs to be more broadly shared with those who would consider a choice for their child like that.

So I believe that if we have openness, transparency around results and how students are doing in a particular school that that will help to address the issue that you've raised. I think having that at a local level and easily available to parents is probably the most important measure.

Now, states are going to implement, you know, other levels and layers of accountabilities around results, and I think that's appropriate. But I think that we have to take a step back as a federal government and resist the notion that we're going to be able to manage this all from a top-down approach.

MR. WHITEHURST: In just a second I'll ask you to join me in thanking the Secretary for spending time with us today. I will ask you as she leaves to remain seated for security reasons, and then after that ask me questions, if you want. Or if you have further questions of her, I'm sure there's a website to which you can direct them at the U.S. Department of Education.

So, Madam Secretary, thank you very much for being here today. I'm extremely appreciative. It was interesting and I look forward to further opportunities to interact with you. And you have certainly my best wishes for your success in the job you've taken on.

SECRETARY DeVOS: Thank you so much, Russ.

MR. WHITEHURST: Thank you very much.

SECRETARY DeVOS: Thank you. Thank you all. (Applause)

MR. WHITEHURST: If anybody -- you know, clearly I'm not the main

event here, but if anybody has any questions for me about the index, you're welcome to ask those now. Yes, go ahead.

SPEAKER: (audio drop) private education. So choice (audio drop) means the size of the difference between (audio drop) and if school (inaudible) will be -- for example, are basically Tweedledum and Tweedledee, where they're administering the same tests and hiring the same teachers and teaching the same common curriculum. Not much of a choice.

But if the schools have profoundly different answers to some fundamental questions about education, you know, the purpose of education, the goal of education, the nature of the teacher -- I'm thinking Waldorf schools, for example -- or the role of the student, then the choice becomes more significant.

In your metric does the depth of the difference between choices play a role in how you score choice?

MR. WHITEHURST: Well, unfortunately, we don't have detailed information on, you know, whether the private schools that we're measuring are fundamentally different from the public schools or whether they differ a lot. But the attempt in the metrics themselves is to incorporate an awareness of what you're talking about.

So the availability of private schools is an important part of what we do on the presumption that the private school that's five blocks away from you as a parent is likely to be different than the public school that's five blocks away. And the private school that's eight blocks away may be different from the private school five blocks away. So that sector itself is more diverse in what it offers and how it holds itself accountable and how it presents itself to the public. The same thing is true of charter schools, though

constrained there by the standardized tests.

I mean, one of the questions I wanted to ask the Secretary, it didn't have time to do, is the question of accountability and information. So she indicated that in response to Dr. Chingos' question, that, you know, the safety protection here would be based on information. And so she didn't think parents would choose the wrong school if they had good information on how the school was performing.

So what do we want private schools to do? Are they going to take the same state tests that kids take in the public schools? That constrains the nature of the education that's delivered. But do we want these schools to provide no information on achievement? And if they don't, how do you choose if you care about that?

So I think there's a fundamental challenge for states that are going down this path and people in the federal government in thinking through how information can be comparable, how you can shop with good information that would allow you to say this private school looks like it's doing the things I want and the kids are doing well in terms of outcomes, and I can compare that with another private school. How do you do that without generating constraints that produce uniformity? So I think your question is an extremely important one.

Yes, go ahead.

MS. BOURBON: Hi. Thank you for this informative discussion. My name is Contessa Bourbon. I was supposed to ask the Secretary, but I think you can reply.

MR. WHITEHURST: I'm sure she won't mind my answering for her, so go ahead. (Laughter)

MS. BOURBON: Yeah. How supportive should government, federal and



state, in promoting STEM education within the context of school choice? Should there be an increased budget on school choice for promoting STEM education? What is your view?

MR. WHITEHURST: I think the Secretary's -- I will speak for her. I think the Secretary's view would be that this is a state and local matter, not primarily a federal matter. And my guess is the Trump administration is not going to be heavily investing in this particular form of education preparation versus that particular form. And I think we saw some evidence in this "Skinny Budget" of maybe actually a cutback in this particular area of policy emphasis.

So I do think what's clear as a message to me is that it's going to be much more up to state government in terms of -- state education departments as to the direction they want to pursue. That has been the case heretofore and we'll have to wait and see, you know, if they screw it up or they manage to take the opportunity and do something good with it.

I mean, one of the complaints I've gotten as I've traveled around the world on education issues and I come back to this country is, you know, why is it that we have no trouble with Denmark having a different education system from Sweden? That seems perfectly okay with us. But, you know, we're not happy with Texas having a different education system than California, you know. We've got states that are bigger than most countries who have education systems. So there is an opportunity there for innovation at the state level.

You know, for me, a question is where's the accountability for that? How do we know who's innovating successfully and who isn't? It's going to be, I think, extraordinarily important to have measurement going forward. It's one of the things I

pressed the Secretary on. How will we know whether you've been successful?

And just because we have numbers doesn't mean we're going to agree on what the numbers ought to be collected on or what they mean. But the absence of some way of measuring it, seems to me we're left with not only opportunity for innovation, but the opportunity for doing things that are simply useless or worse and never knowing about it.

I'm going to take one more question and then I know that many of you have places to go and I'll let you leave politely instead of just walking out on me while I'm in the middle of something. (Laughter)

Go ahead.

SPEAKER: I think for students with disabilities choice can sometimes have more potential reward, but also more potential risk. In the school districts that you've looked at, do you have a good example of a system that benefited from choice and benefited with good outcomes for students with disabilities?

MR. WHITEHURST: We don't look specifically at that. I would take it as a valid criticism that we don't. Sometimes what we do is driven almost entirely by the availability of data rather than, you know, a fine conceptual view of what we ought to be looking at.

I would say in general students with disabilities in many states and localities have more choices than students without diagnosed disabilities, who are in the regular school system. Vouchers, which are contentious in the general sense, have been available in many states for kids with disabilities when they're not available for kids without diagnosed disabilities, and not very controversial either.

And in many circumstance, in many localities and jurisdictions, families

of children with disabilities can petition for and get access to private education for their kids based on a demonstration that what their child needs is not provided in the regular public schools. So a lot of people would look at the evolution of choice in the sector of education for kids with disabilities as a model for -- behind which the regular public education is proceeding.

It's also the case that it is typically true that the traditional public schools are better resourced for addressing the issues of children with serious disabilities than are private schools or kind of freestanding charter schools because the expense, as you know, can be very large.

All right. Again, I thank you very much for being here. I feel like I learned a little something about the Secretary. I hope you did, too. Thanks for coming.  
(Applause)

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