

## INTERVIEW

# Betsy DeVos

## The Reformer

**B**etsy DeVos is a reformer. At Calvin College, the young Elisabeth Prince undertook her vocation, becoming involved with campus politics and remaining politically active ever since. For more than 30 years, Mrs. DeVos has led a variety of campaigns, party organizations, and political action committees, including six years as chairman of the Michigan Republican Party. The reforming tendency runs in her family—in 2006 her husband, Dick DeVos, was the Republican nominee for governor of Michigan.

In business as in politics, the DeVoses look to solve social problems with innovative solutions. Betsy serves as chairman of the Windquest Group, a privately held, multi-company operating group which invests in technology, manufacturing, and clean energy. She founded the firm with her husband in 1989. Dick DeVos is also the former president of Amway, and former president of the Orlando Magic NBA franchise.

Perhaps most importantly, Mrs. DeVos pursues reform through a variety of nonprofit roles. She is chairman of the Dick and Betsy DeVos Family Foundation, and her charitable interests range widely. She is a member of several national and local boards, including the DeVos Institute for Arts Management at the Kennedy Center, Mars Hill Bible Church, Kids Hope USA, and the Foundation for Excellence in Education. She is perhaps best known as a leading advocate for the educational-choice movement. To that end, she serves as chairman of the American Federation for Children and the Alliance for School Choice.

*Philanthropy* recently spoke with Mrs. DeVos about her work in educational reform generally, and school choice specifically.



**PHILANTHROPY:** It's been more than 50 years since Milton Friedman wrote "The Role of Government in Education," which made the first principled case for school choice. It's coming up on 25 years since Wisconsin instituted the nation's first private-school voucher program in Milwaukee. So, how do you feel about progress to date?

**MRS. DEVOS:** Well, I've never been more optimistic.

Today there are about 250,000 students in 33 publicly funded, private-choice programs in 17 states and the District of Columbia. The movement's growth is accelerating. Within the last year, the number of students in educational-choice programs grew by about 40,000. In 2012, we saw new programs in Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Mississippi, and New Hampshire, and expanded programs in Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. In 2011, Indiana passed a major new statewide

voucher program, which is only in its second academic year and is already enrolling nearly 10,000 children. We conducted polling in five states, and found educational choice enjoyed enormous popularity, especially among Latinos.

This confluence of events is forcing people to take note, particularly because of the public's awareness that traditional public schools are not succeeding. In fact, let's be clear, in many cases, they are *failing*. That's helped people become more open to what were once considered really radical reforms—reforms like vouchers, tax credits, and education savings accounts.

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**PHILANTHROPY:** You've been a part of the movement since it was considered radical. What got you interested in the first place?

**MRS. DEVOS:** Well, it's not like there was a single incident that drew me in. It was more gradual than that. When Dick and I had school-age children ourselves, we visited the Potter's House Christian School, which for more than 30 years has been serving a part of Grand Rapids with many low-income families. While we were at the school, we met parents who were doing everything in their power to have their kids in an environment that was safe, where they were learning, and where the atmosphere was just electric with curiosity, with love for one another.

We kept going back. We would visit, and think about what we saw, and we'd want to visit again. We knew we had the resources to send our kids to whatever school was best for them. For these parents, however, paying tuition was a real sacrifice. We started supporting individual students at the school, and that grew into a larger commitment. To this day, we support the Potter's House at a significant level.

**PHILANTHROPY:** And how did supporting that one school lead you to think more broadly about education?

**MRS. DEVOS:** Like I mentioned, at the time, we had children who were school-age themselves. Well, that touched home. Dick and I became increasingly committed to helping other parents—parents from low-income families, in particular. If we could choose the right school for our kids, it only seemed fair that they could do the same for their kids.

Dick expressed his commitment by running for the state board of education in Michigan; he was elected in 1990. I got involved by starting a foundation that gave scholarships to low-income families so that parents could decide where their kids would go to school. We realized very quickly that, while it was wonderful to help the families that we were helping through the scholarship fund, it was never going to fundamentally address the real problem. Most parents were not going to get the scholarship they wanted, and that meant most kids would not have the opportunities they deserved.

**PHILANTHROPY:** So that's how you became more involved in the educational choice movement?

**MRS. DEVOS:** Exactly. During the 1990s, I served on the boards of two national 501(c)(3) charities, Children First America and the American Education Reform Council, both of which worked to expand educational choice through vouchers and tax credits. Both Dick and I were politically involved in passing Michigan's first charter-school bill in 1993. And in 2000, we tried—unsuccessfully—to change the state constitution to allow tax-credit scholarships or vouchers. It was really tragic, because Michigan has so many families, particularly in our state's large, urban school districts, who are desperate for better educational options, and because our state constitution has some of the most restrictive language limiting educational choice in the country.

I've been in politics for some time, and I had been chair of the Michigan Republican Party for a few years. In response to the defeat of the proposed constitutional amendment I started a political action committee in Michigan called the Great Lakes Education Project, which was devoted to promoting education reform through the expansion of charter schools in the state. Over the course of two years—from 2001 through 2002—our work in Michigan was so successful that some of our friends in the movement began to say, "We really need to do this nationally." And I said, "Yes, I think we do."

**PHILANTHROPY:** I take it that was the beginning of what's now called the American Federation for Children, which you chair?

**MRS. DEVOS:** Well, it's the beginning of my involvement with AFC. The late John Walton and Dick started up what was then called All Children Matter, a 527 political organization, which I chaired. A number of other school choice supporters also worked very closely with the Alliance for School Choice, a 501(c)(3), to educate the public about the need for greater educational choice. But it didn't feel like a cohesive-enough effort. Successful advocacy requires coordinating a lot of moving parts: identifying potential legislators, educating them about the issue, getting them elected, helping them craft and pass legislation, and then, once the laws are passed, helping them with implementation of the programs to ensure they work for children.

We took a long, hard look at ourselves and determined that we could do this in a much smoother manner. It was clear that we needed a more cohesive effort. So a few years ago, we reorganized a number of the key players. We formed the American Federation for Children as a 501(c)(4). It is the umbrella organization which is affiliated with the Alliance for School Choice—still a (c)(3)—and AFC’s political action committee, the American Federation for Children Action Fund. Now that our efforts are better organized, it’s been working really, really well.

**PHILANTHROPY:** So what have been your biggest successes?

**MRS. DEVOS:** Florida. Through its tax-credit scholarship program, Florida has enjoyed the nation’s longest period of widespread educational choice, and through the expansion of the program, it has an ever-growing number of students—currently over 50,000—attending the school of their family’s choice.

Florida is also probably the best case study of how all of the pieces work together. John Kirtley led a brilliant effort integrating 501(c)(3), (c)(4), and 527 capabilities. More importantly, John led a very intentional effort to cultivate broad support for the program among both policy-makers and the public, and to ensure a strong focus on offering high-quality options as a fundamental part of the choice program. That broad base of support has prevented efforts to overturn or undermine educational choice. Florida is the state we point to and say, “If you do this well, you won’t have to spend a lot of energy protecting the programs you passed. As your programs gain popularity, you can build and enhance them in a major way.”

**PHILANTHROPY:** Anywhere else?

**MRS. DEVOS:** We’ve seen major advances recently in Louisiana and Indiana. Those two states passed programs that, between the two of them, have the potential to serve nearly one million students every year. Now, we know not all of those million eligible students are going to take advantage of the programs, but the chances for widespread adoption of educational choice are very high.

We were involved in both those states for several election cycles. Those reforms came about as the result, I believe, of an increasing focus on helping get the right people elected, helping to craft good legislation, helping to get it implemented once it’s passed, and then helping students find schools once the legislation is in place. At the American Fed-

eration for Children, we work at every stage of that continuum, which makes us unique among the national reform efforts.

That said, we believe that the only way that real education choice is going to be successfully implemented is by making it a bipartisan or a non-partisan issue. Until very recently, of course, that hasn’t been the case. Most of the Democrats have been supported by the teachers’ unions and, not surprisingly, taken the side of the teachers’ unions. What we’ve tried to do is engage with Democrats, to make it politically safe for them to do what they know in their heart of hearts is the right thing. Education should be non-partisan.

**PHILANTHROPY:** Interesting that you mention the need for a bipartisan consensus in education. But when I look at the three states that you’ve mentioned by name—Florida, Louisiana, and Indiana—I immediately think of three reform-minded Republican governors.

**MRS. DEVOS:** I wouldn’t underestimate the growing interest in educational choice among Democratic leaders. I think we’re going to see increasing numbers of Democrats embracing educational-choice programs at a gubernatorial level. We are certainly seeing it happen at the state-legislator level. In Florida, for example, what started as a measure supported only by Republicans has now become a movement with significant Democratic support. The same thing is happening in Louisiana. In both legislative chambers, the sponsors of the latest educational-choice bill were Democrats. And we enjoyed that broad bipartisan support precisely because of the long, steady grassroots efforts, spanning several election cycles, from 2003 onward.

**PHILANTHROPY:** Speaking of grassroots, let me ask you: What works? Are there a few concrete examples of really effective practices?

**MRS. DEVOS:** Oh, yes. I don’t want to get too deep into the weeds, but here’s an episode that may be revealing. Back in 2008, in Louisiana, the state’s Department of Education was clearly opposed to implementing the new pilot voucher program that had been created by Governor Jindal and a bipartisan coalition of legislators to help children trapped in failing schools in New Orleans. The department at that time seemed to put up as many roadblocks as possible. They gave parents one week—one week!—to sign up for the program. We had to work fast to come up with creative ways to alert parents of the new program.

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We did everything we could to engage and inform parents about the voucher opportunity. We bought ad time on urban radio stations. We bought billboards and web ads, did mailings and phone calls. We worked with ambassadors from the various parish churches and community groups. We hosted parent-information meetings. It was all grassroots work. It can look like tedious work, but it's massively important.

All of this grassroots activity also had the effect of raising awareness about the program among public officials and community leaders. When the legislature considered expanding the New Orleans program statewide in 2012, elected officials were aware of the tangible support for greater educational choice. From the beginning of the debate to the end, overwhelming parental satisfaction with the program was obvious. Today, with a far more supportive state Department of Education led by reform-minded Superintendent John White and a much longer enrollment period, the new statewide program in Louisiana enrolled nearly 5,000 children in its first academic year and is poised to grow again next year.

**PHILANTHROPY:** Apart from increasing educational choice, what do you see as especially promising education-reforms strategies?

**MRS. DEVOS:** I'm most focused on educational choice. But, thinking more broadly, what we are trying to do is tear down the mindset that assigns students to a school based solely on the zip code of their family's home. We advocate instead for as much freedom as possible. One long-term trend that's working in our favor is technology. It seems to me that, in the internet age, the tendency to equate "education" with "specific school buildings" is going to be greatly diminished. Within the right framework of legislation, that freedom will ultimately be healthy for the education of our kids.

**PHILANTHROPY:** So you see digital learning, blended learning, as contributing to the educational-choice movement?

**MRS. DEVOS:** Well, I think digital learning is in its infancy relative to the influence that it can and will have. That said, I'm amazed when I watch my not-yet-two-year-old

granddaughter navigate an iPad and go to whatever game or program she wants. Every parent knows how quickly children pick up new technologies. It would be unconscionable not to embrace that and use it to help kids achieve their full potential in every way possible.

I mean, I was bored all the way through high school. I can only imagine how much more boring it is today, when you check all of those new technologies at the door and go sit in rows of desks and listen to somebody talk at you for 30 or 40 minutes. Can you imagine sitting through an indifferent lecture when you know there are programs that make learning fun, resources that make information instantly accessible? I can't.

**PHILANTHROPY:** What about homeschooling?

**MRS. DEVOS:** Homeschooling represents another perfectly valid educational option. We've seen more and more people opt for homeschooling, including in urban areas. What you're seeing is parents who are fed up with their lack of power to do anything about where their kids are assigned to go to school. To the extent that homeschooling puts parents back in charge of their kids' education, more power to them.

**PHILANTHROPY:** And charter schools?

**MRS. DEVOS:** Charter schools are another choice—a very valid choice. As we work to help provide parents with more educational choices, it is always with the assumption that charter schools are part of the equation. We think of the educational choice movement as involving many parts: vouchers and tax credits, certainly, but also virtual schools, magnet schools, homeschooling, and charter schools.

**PHILANTHROPY:** Do you worry that the relative popularity of charter schools is endangering the rest of your reform agenda? These days, it's fairly safe to voice support for charter schools. Does that diminish the appeal of other reforms, like vouchers and tax credits?

**MRS. DEVOS:** There are probably some funders who believe that charter schools are the be-all and end-all answer. To them, I would simply point out that charter schools take a while to start up and get operating. Meanwhile, there are very good non-public schools, hanging on

by a shoestring, that can begin taking students today. Charter schools, on the other hand, take time and resources. Believe me. My husband started a charter high school.

**PHILANTHROPY:** Oh really?

**MRS. DEVOS:** Yes. Actually, it was my idea for him. He's a pilot. He flies everything—jets, helicopters, you name it. And, of course, he's been involved in educational choice for as long as I have. A few years ago, I asked him, "Why don't you combine your love of flying and your love of education? You could start an aviation school!" And that's exactly what he did. He started the West Michigan Aviation Academy, a charter high school located at the Gerald Ford Airport in Grand Rapids.

**PHILANTHROPY:** Talk about a niche.

**MRS. DEVOS:** It is! Of course, they have high academic standards, in order to prepare students for real-world careers in aviation, whether it's as pilots, aeronautical engineers, or airport administrators. There are many opportunities in aviation, and if you can interest highschoolers in those careers, you'll find that they tend to focus more on their courses in math and science. This is the school's third year, so we have 9th through 11th grades, adding another grade every year. Next year, they will see the first senior class.

**PHILANTHROPY:** Is there a vocational component to the curriculum? Are any of the students up to their wrists in axle grease?

**MRS. DEVOS:** No, they don't offer a vocational track quite like that—but they do give kids the opportunity to pursue hands-on technician training and they give them the opportunity to fly. When they enter the 9th grade, they all do glider flights, and many of them have never been in an airplane before. Any student who wants to pursue pilot training has the opportunity. More broadly, there are classes and curriculum that teach the science and mechanics of aviation.

**PHILANTHROPY:** So how do you divide up your time? Does most of your time go to the charitable work, like supporting Potter's House and the aviation charter school? Or does most of your time go to arguing, lobbying, and advocating on behalf of greater educational choice?

**MRS. DEVOS:** Well, I don't really think about segmenting my time. Every time I think about the work Dick and I do, it's all part of a holistic effort to improve American education. Some of it is direct and local; some of it involves pol-



*Betsy DeVos with Angie, the girl she mentors at the Potter's House in Grand Rapids.*

icy and has national reach. But the motivation behind all of our efforts is the same.

Where we have to be careful, of course, is how we engage in public-policy advocacy. We have to be scrupulous about how we allocate personnel, resources, and staff time. We need to carefully record everything, so that we can demonstrate our compliance with all campaign finance laws and all IRS regulations regarding 501(c)(3) work. But, because I'm a volunteer, I can look at my time more holistically. I probably spend more time speaking about the need for more donors to get involved in advocacy efforts because I believe it's where limited dollars can make the biggest difference.

**PHILANTHROPY:** So what does success look like to you? If you were to imagine the retirement party of your dreams, what are we toasting?

**MRS. DEVOS:** That all parents, regardless of their zip code, have had the opportunity to choose the best educational setting for their children. And that all students have had the opportunity to fulfill their God-given potential. **P**