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DeVos tells big-city school superintendents she believes in ‘great public schools’ — but some remain skeptical

By [Emma Brown](#) March 13 at 4:35 PM

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos told urban school superintendents on Monday that her agency intends to support their work and that “great public schools” should be among the education options available to families.

“I trust parents, I trust teachers, and I trust school leaders to do what is right for the students they serve,” she said, emphasizing her push to shrink the federal government’s role in local schools. “When Washington gets out of your way, you should be able to unleash new and creative thinking to set children up for success.”

It was a conciliatory message from an education secretary who has spent nearly three decades promoting vouchers, charter schools and other alternatives to traditional public schools. But it did not quell all the skepticism in the room at the annual legislative conference of the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of 68 big-city school systems.

“I think we heard the kind of philosophical statements that everyone can support,” said Allegra “Happy” Haynes, a Denver school board member. “They were a little short on details.”

Haynes said DeVos’s affinity for cutting red tape doesn’t always mesh with her desire to empower parents. For example: President Barack Obama’s administration wrote regulations requiring states to consult with parents and community members in developing plans for holding schools accountable for results. But Congress scrapped those regulations last week, and DeVos made clear that though states may ask parents for input if they wish, federal law mandates consultation with only one party: the governor.

“What about those parents you keep talking about?” Haynes said.

DeVos [spoke for 12 minutes](#) and did not take any questions. Saying she wanted to introduce herself beyond the headlines and “Saturday Night Live” skits — “although it is flattering to be portrayed by Kate McKinnon, a woman younger than my oldest son,” she said — DeVos recounted how she became interested in education after visiting the Potter’s House, a private Christian school serving low-income children in her home town of Grand Rapids, Mich.

She said she wanted to help more disadvantaged children gain access to good schools — and that as education secretary, she wants to ensure more parents have an opportunity to choose schools that meet the unique needs of their children.

“I am agnostic as to the delivery system, or the building in which it takes place, so long as that child is in an environment that meets their needs and the parents are satisfied,” DeVos said. “And one of those quality options should be a great public school.”

Alberto Carvalho, superintendent of schools in Miami-Dade County, said he appreciated DeVos’s acknowledgment that public schools are important. Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council for the Great City Schools, said he was encouraged that the secretary had accepted the invitation to speak and had indicated a willingness to support district leaders.

“We know that there are things we’ll be able to work on, and other things where we’re going to be on the opposite side. But that’s what this town is made of,” Casserly said. “We want to have a working relationship with her.”

Henderson Lewis Jr., superintendent of the Orleans Parish School Board in New Orleans, said he agrees with some of DeVos’s main ideas. He, too, is a staunch proponent of parent choice and school autonomy. But he said he has been troubled by how little DeVos has spoken about her vision for holding schools accountable when they receive public dollars to serve children.

DeVos has championed voucher programs, for example, that allow private schools to continue accepting taxpayer-supported students no matter how well — or poorly — those students fare.

“It’s great to give parents options,” Lewis said. “But, at the same time, what type of oversight is in place?”

Hurricane Katrina wiped away the traditional public school system in New Orleans in 2005, and now almost all New Orleans students attend charter schools. Charter schools face closure if their students fail to show academic progress over a period of years, and though they are run independently, New Orleans also has systems meant to manage enrollment and discipline uniformly and fairly.

“We’re providing choice, but it’s coupled with a layer of oversight to make sure that the needs of our students are being met,” Lewis said.