Mid-Atlantic Education Review

Special Issue: Public Education in the Age of Trump
The Mid-Atlantic Education Review

The Mid-Atlantic Education Review is a peer-reviewed, online journal that provides a forum for studies pertaining to educational issues of interest to educators and researchers in the Mid-Atlantic region. The Review publishes articles that contribute to the knowledge base of researchers, policy-makers, teachers, and administrators. To appeal to a broad educational audience, articles cover a spectrum in their level of analysis, subject focus, and methodological approach. The journal is available at http://maereview.org

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Special Issue: Public Education in the Age of Trump

This Special Issue provides a collection of scholarly essays written in the span between the election and subsequent inauguration of Donald Trump. The editorial board felt the need to take action, and as educators and scholars we did this in the way we know how: we asked our colleagues to join in a reflection on where we are and where we might be going. There was a sense of danger, and with it, a great need to talk to each other and to understand experiences with which we are not familiar. Each of the essays in this issue speaks in that way, in that spirit, from a different perspective.
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Cyber Schooling and Betsy DeVos: A Personal Perspective

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Abstract

This essay offers a personal perspective on cyber schooling, by a graduate of a cyber high school. In this paper, I discuss my own experiences with cyber schooling, and how these experiences helped to form me as a citizen and democratic educator. I then critique cyber schooling and identify various flaws in its design and implementation which affect both individuals and communities. I tie these experiences and critiques to an analysis of how Betsy DeVos, Donald J. Trump’s nominee for U.S. Secretary of Education, may prioritize school choice in the national education policy. Using an interview with DeVos in Philanthropy Magazine, I examine how DeVos’s own words betray her biases and lack of experience with cyber schooling, and the future of public education. I conclude with a call to educators and citizens to unite in their advocacy for democratic education, and schools that prioritize learning over testing.

Keywords: cyber schools; democratic education; school choice
Cyber Schooling and Betsy DeVos: A Personal Perspective

Introduction

“‘I have a son. He's 10 years old. He has computers. He is so good with these computers, it's unbelievable. The security aspect of cyber is very, very tough. And maybe it's hardly do-able. But I will say, we are not doing the job we should be doing, but that's true throughout our whole governmental society. We have so many things that we have to do better, Lester and certainly cyber is one of them.’”

– Donald J. Trump during the first Presidential Debate, 2016

As a proponent of democratic education, when I review education policy or theory, I look for the potential of academic programs to promote student civic engagement and active citizenship. Increasingly, these essential elements of democratic education are absent in the economy-centric curriculum popular in contemporary politics. Cyber schooling is an interesting and fertile topic for debate about what form schools and education could take over the next century; it is also a topic of personal importance to me as a cyber high-school graduate. In this essay, I share my experience as a cyber student and offer reflections on how my experiences inform my perspective on the future of education under President-elect Trump and his Secretary of Education nominee, Betsy DeVos.

From tenth grade, I was enrolled in PA Cyber, the largest cyber school in Pennsylvania, which had over 10,000 students. PA Cyber is a charter school founded in 2000, four years before I began attending. The school was started in Midland, Pennsylvania, where, after the public high school had been closed for five years and students were being bussed across the state line to Ohio, a cyber school seemed like a reasonable alternative. PA Cyber grew very quickly and there was a lot of money from the state to support its growth. By 2004, there was a large range of course offerings, free (online) tutoring every day of the week, programs to enroll students in online and in-person community college courses for free, and brand new materials for every student (textbooks, computers, software, headsets, etc.). The majority of PA Cyber’s students were in high school, but from its inception it enrolled students from kindergarten to twelfth grade.

My mother strong-armed me into cyber school; after a year and a half of homeschooling, she was concerned I lacked motivation to graduate and might need more structure. I had been sick, sleeping eighteen hours a day throughout this time, and by 10th grade it appeared I was getting better. My mother was right to put me in cyber school; I quickly realized that I could take whatever classes I wanted without any bureaucratic roadblocks (e.g., tracking, prerequisites, required A’s in a prior course); it was my dream come true. On a typical day, I spent between three and six hours working on school work; during the rest of the day, I would play with my siblings, write, or volunteer. I racked up over 3,000 hours of community service in high school. I mentored, repaired homes for low-income families and senior citizens, did office work, worked on arts and crafts projects, sang in a rock band, and frequently participated in my community—all because I wanted to. I would not have been able to do these things that helped me become the person I am if I had attended traditional public school. I would have spent much of my day shuffling
between classes, losing valuable learning time to the uncompromising and arbitrary high-school period schedule. Additionally, I would never have been able to attend community college, where I learned about citizenship and democracy from my exceedingly diverse and fascinating classmates. I graduated high school with 30 college credits, my heart set on studying sociology and Spanish and pursuing social justice.

PA Cyber acts like a public school in the sense that they have 100% open admissions. They will not turn down a student. They have a charter because it was necessary for the experimental aspects of their program (being online). According to the Charter Schools Office of the Pennsylvania DOE,

At the heart of the Charter School Law is the idea that cyber charter schools will serve as laboratories of innovation on behalf of all of Pennsylvania’s schools. Therefore, a cyber charter school applicant must demonstrate that the proposed cyber charter school will provide innovative and unique educational opportunities for students beyond what is currently in operation. (2006, p. 3)

PA Cyber’s approach to education worked extremely well for me. During the years of my attendance, each student (or family, if multiple children attended from one family) was assigned an Instructional Supervisor (IS) who acted as a guidance counselor and an academic advisor. My IS was outstanding; he supported me, challenged me, and did a perfect job adapting his regular communications to my fierce need for independence. Had he not helped me through the process and proposed the possibility of receiving college credit, I would not ever have imagined I could take community college classes during high school (let alone for free).

I recently found out that most of the things I loved about PA Cyber have been “reformed” (both by lawmakers and the charter organization). The dual-enrollment program that allowed me to take community college courses no longer is available to cyber or charter schools (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016, p. 5). While the grant program continues for public school districts (and therefore charter students living in those districts), few districts bother going through the application process because they can offer AP courses onsite instead. Also, PA Cyber has switched from the Instructional Supervisor model (ratio 100:1) with check-ins every two weeks, to an academic advisor model (ratio 200:1) on a four-week schedule. This pushed much of the responsibility for student progress onto the virtual classroom teachers and weakened the relationships between advisors and their students. Even worse, PA Cyber now requires students to log in to their learning management system (LMS) Monday-Friday for “attendance,” and weekend work no longer “counts.” According to the Pennsylvania School Code, attendance is calculated based on the 180 days during which school is in session, which cannot include more than

1 In 2014, PA Cyber’s virtual classroom teachers unionized, becoming the only unionized cyber school in the state (Associated Press, 2014). Obviously, some changes have been for the better; however, this is only a small portion of employees because many teachers are employed by a secondary non-profit, which contracts with the school, and many certified teachers occupy non-teaching roles, for instance, as academic advisors.
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one Saturday per month, and even then, only in extreme circumstances (Pennsylvania Public School Code of 1949 § 15-1502). These changes run counter to my high school experience, which did not attempt to box me into a traditional schooling format. It was through the initially flexible and innovative mission of PA Cyber that I learned how to be a self-regulated learner—the curriculum, delivery, support services, and institutional values reinforced this type of education. Unfortunately, the recent structural changes to PA Cyber’s programs may negate some or most of these benefits for students.

I recognize that no matter how wonderful cyber schooling can be for some, it is not a good alternative for all students—not even all high school students. Therefore, I would like to offer a brief critique of cyber schools on two fronts. The first deals with the types of students who would truly benefit from cyber schools. The second critique discusses some of the issues affecting cyber students and communities on a larger scale—even those who benefit most from cyber schools.

Cyber schools work best for students who work well independently and students who require flexibility because of unique life circumstances (e.g., professional actors, athletes, young parents). In some cases, however, students in cyber schools have been forced out of traditional schools for reasons related to delinquency or discipline and may require more institutional support or structure than a cyber school can reasonably offer. Despite a cyber school like PA Cyber offering free tutoring and ensuring that teachers are extremely accessible and responsive to student emails, the onus falls on the student to ask for additional help. When a student is delinquent in accomplishing school work or unresponsive to teacher or advisor communications, there is very little the school can do but report truancy, which quickly becomes a legal battle with a parent rather than a school matter with a student. There are extenuating circumstances, however, where students may take longer to complete high school (say, 6 years) than the average student (e.g., becoming a parent, providing for one’s family financially) and are allowed the flexibility to do so. In a school like PA Cyber, these students are given the support and advising necessary to work from a longer-term plan (PA Cyber employee, personal communication, December 9, 2016). Yet it is unclear what percentage of cyber students are on such a path; studies on Pennsylvania cyber schooling often look at achievement measures (e.g., standardized test scores) and costs but fail to interrogate the experiences of the students (see Mann, Kotok, Frankenberg, Fuller, & Schafft, 2016; Schafft & Frankenberg, 2014). There is also a question regarding the level of interaction of Cyber School students with a larger community. Without a mandate to ensure all students participate in community building activities, cyber schooling places the onus of responsibility to learn how to serve one’s community back on the student. Cyber school and public school students both could benefit from a curriculum establishing an interactive citizenship project that brings them together for a collaborative effort.

2 Cyber school students each have their own reasons for attending cyber school, especially at the secondary level. My observation that their presence in public school would benefit their peers and teachers is not intended to diminish their experience in any way.
Similarly, local school districts in Pennsylvania lose significant funding for students who enroll in cyber schools. Local districts are required to pay the cyber charter for each student from their district who enrolls; the price paid is equivalent to the average cost of schooling a student in the district (Mann et al., 2016). Mann et al. (2016) argue that this algorithm should be reworked since many of the overhead costs for public schools (e.g., building costs) do not apply to cyber charter schools. Given the favorable revenue to expense ratios, there is profit to be made for savvy school leaders. In some states (Pennsylvania is one), all charter schools must be operated by a non-profit organization; however, a non-profit can contract with a for-profit corporation to provide services for the school. Even when a secondary non-profit is contracted to provide curricular resources for a school, for instance, there are opportunities for corruption. For example, PA Cyber’s founder recently pleaded guilty to federal crimes including tax conspiracy which were committed under the guise of various non-profit and for-profit organizations related to the PA Cyber Charter School (Ove, 2016). While this scandal in no way had an impact on my experience with PA Cyber at the time of investigation—while I was still in high school—I, like many other taxpayers, am distraught that a misuse of public funds could add up to over $8 million in personal gain in only a few years (Bowling, 2016). In the wake of financial scandal, there has been demand for increased government oversight and accountability measures (Mann et al., 2016; Schafft and Frankenberg, 2014).

All government oversight and accountability measures are not created equal. Across the nation, educators are fighting the test-score centric accountability mentality that turns students into numbers and teachers into slaves to test creators. The last thing we want is to impose further unjust dictates. As an educator, my concern is that both privatization and more stringent government involvement will lead to the same problem: unjust accountability, less community involvement, and governance structures that favor either the status quo or profitability (or both) over student learning. Pennsylvania laws governing cyber schooling, which for our purposes are all cyber charter schools, have been weak in the areas of accountability for use of public funding and governance. These issues require creative and individual consideration, but lawmakers are too quick to assume that imposing the same rules on both cyber and brick-and-mortar programs will create accountability. While it is essential that accountability measures ensure equitable funding, and learning for all students, it is also essential to understand the freedoms needed for cyber schooling to be able to work as the “laboratories of innovation” they were designed to be (Charter Schools Office, Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2006). It requires freedom for educators to try new things, and a structure that supports the well-being of the individual students.

Cyber Schools in the National Context

Betsy DeVos is likely to make many changes to the educational landscape of the United States when she takes on the role of Secretary of the Department of Education. Valerie Strauss (2016) recently wrote for the Washington Post, “Wealth should not buy a seat at the head of any policy-making table”; yet, this seems to be what has happened, as Betsy Devos claims her only educational experience has come as a donor to a school choice advocacy group. DeVos’s understanding of everything to do with education is based on a free-market ideology, which positions the student solely as a consumer. Additionally,
DeVos’s vision for education seems to be vague, if not completely misguided, as evidenced in this interview with *Philanthropy*:

> 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*, 2013).

While there is some degree of truth to the idea that learning can happen anywhere and need not be tied to a school building, that “freedom” looks different for each student. Many responsible pre-teens and teens may benefit like I did from being able to learn anywhere. Nevertheless, young children outside of a school building are not capable of self-regulation and self-teaching in the same way middle and high school students can be. Ultimately, let me be clear, cyber schooling is not intended for small children. Cyber schooling at the K-5 levels is basically homeschooling. A physical curriculum is given to parents and they must deliver this curriculum to their children without any training. Such a “freedom” does not entitle young children to the same public education afforded to those taught by highly qualified and trained teachers. Furthermore, freedom from a “specific school building” which is associated with “education” comes at a great price because it divorces tax dollars from the local communities in which they are drawn. In Devos’ mind “the right legislation” removes accountability to a local public and increases the need for bureaucratic oversight as evidenced by the PA Cyber example above. The same interviewer then prompts DeVos to say more:

**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 (*Philanthropy*, 2013).

Generations who grew up before the age of the internet often look at technology through the eyes of their children and grandchildren. Their bafflement betrays how truly clueless they are (none more so than Donald Trump himself, see epigraph), and it is even more worrisome that the Secretary of Education would be so clueless. Because technology is fascinating does not mean it is good for a two-year-old, as though society owes it to toddlers to let them play with toys just because they are interesting. DeVos continues:

> 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, 2013)

DeVos does not understand that the programs she refers to (that “make learning fun”) bear inconsistent evidence as to whether they actually promote learning (Tsai, Yu, Hsiao, 2012). A lot of money has gone into making “fun” programs that offer rote practice for statewide testing, but as someone who took an online high-school biology course, I can say with certainty that flash games cannot replace lab experience (and fail to be fun). Similarly, although my story resonates with her assertion of boredom, the fact is that this is much more of a curricular issue (teaching to tests, meeting requirements for college) than a delivery issue. In my experience, trained teachers rarely fall back on a lesson plan consisting of 30-40-minute long lectures with no student interaction. While I am the first to admit that there can be delivery issues in brick-and-mortar classrooms, delivery is only as good as the content delivered. DeVos’s advocacy efforts betray her vision of curricular content determined by the common core (aka “higher standards”) and school choice, policies that pose much broader threats than one poor teacher (Cramer, 2016).

DeVos’s foundation, the American Federation for Children, has spent millions of dollars lobbying for public vouchers for private and religious schools (Strauss, 2016). Given the largest educational policy platform in the country, DeVos could be successful in implementing voucher programs nationally. One possible outcome of this could be that, the more experimental charter schools, especially those with virtually unlimited admissions quotas, like PA Cyber, would grow exponentially. Growth in online programs might force states to implement greater standardization, as happened in Pennsylvania, to align with the mold of public schools in order to limit competition for students and protect teachers’ jobs. On the other hand, if privatization is successfully promoted and enabled by the administration, we might see a different trend in cyber schooling. Assuming vouchers promote the conversion of non-profit charters into for-profit, voucher-eligible private schools (even in states where, currently, for-profits are not eligible to receive public funds), we could see failing schools stay open simply because they remain profitable without any improvement in student learning, as is the case in Michigan, DeVos’ home state (Strauss, 2016). This means that eventually experimental schools will cease to be experimental for the sake of student learning, instead becoming experimental for the sake of profit. The result for communities across the county or state will be even less direct input in the education of their children and the use of their tax dollars.

So, in the era of DeVos, what do educators need to know about cyber schools? First, with the input of innovative educators, cyber schools can be a great place to work, a wonderful method in which to learn, and an opportunity for cultivating creativity and self-regulated learning skills for dedicated and community-minded students. Second, educators across states need to band together to protect students’ experiences in both cyber and brick-and-mortar schools (public, charter, or otherwise) to ensure that government regulation does not stifle student learning and creativity. Too often, teachers pit themselves and their stances against each other based on public or charter, union or non-union organization. The fact is, every student needs educators and their organizations to lobby for learning, imagination, and curiosity in the classroom, whether that involves technology or not.
Administrators and teachers alike need to begin to imagine what school could look like outside of cement-block classroom walls.

In the first draft of this essay, I relied on what DeVos had previously said to write an optimistic conclusion describing some of the areas that might be ripe for positive changes. My assessment seems premature, however, as in the past few weeks more and more evidence of DeVos’s ties to corporate interests, the common core, and standardized testing has come to light. Based on their senate confirmation hearings, there is absolutely no reason to believe that anyone in Trump’s administration would be likely to keep a single promise they make to anyone but their corporate cronies. We must organize around the founding idea of education as a public good essential for democracy by resisting standardized testing, arbitrary accountability measures, and disenfranchisement. In order to do so, we must stop reiterating the rhetoric of (market-defined) accountability: that we need more numbers, objective data, longer or shorter reports, or better evidence to prove what we already know to be true. As Paul N. Markham (2015) describes, there is an avalanche coming for us, and “When [we] understand that the avalanche is not about ‘numbers,’ but about the well-being of our society, [we] can bring significant insights and actionable strategies to the table” (p. 251). We must stop acting like numbers will do anything to solve this problem. True democracy is what we need to teach the children in our schools, and we need to start this work by acting as democratic citizens ourselves. Students need to see us doing everything in our power to make sure the voices of our students, teachers, administrators, and citizens are heard over the incessant droning about efficiency and competition from the oligarchy represented in Trump’s cabinet. Let us make 2017 the year of democracy.

References


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**Nora Devlin** recently completed an Ed.M. in Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education at Rutgers Graduate School of Education; she hopes to begin working toward a PhD in Fall 2017.
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The Journal

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