

Editorial

“Yachts and Guns and Bears – oh my!”: The Ministry of Truth... errrrr, Department of Education in the United States

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Over the summer, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos could not seem to stay out of the limelight. In July, someone quietly untied the Secretary’s \$40 million yacht during the night as it docked in Huron, Ohio and the crew aboard slept, causing five to ten thousand dollars of damage when the vessel drifted into the dock. As comedian Stephen Colbert reassured his late-night audience, however, no one needed to fear for the Secretary’s weekend lake plans since this was one of ten opulent yachts owned by her family. In August, she again made a splash when the New York Times reported her plans to evaluate whether individual states can allow local schools to use federal funds to purchase firearms for “safety.” A loophole in the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act potentially left open the possibility of utilizing a portion of the Act’s one billion dollar Student Support and Academic Enrichment grants to this end. A spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Education (DoEd) claimed this issue is “getting blown way out of proportion,” but one could easily disagree. The Secretary heads the Federal School Safety Commission, supports the President’s proposal to eliminate gun-free zones on school grounds (because, she argued, grizzly bears “might” endanger children), and belongs to a family whose politics and fortune intersect with right-wing radicalism, Christian fanaticism, and mercenarism.

In addition to these headlines, others noted that several civil and disability rights organizations—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), National Federation of the Blind (NFB), and Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (CPAA)—filed suit against the Secretary of Education and the DoEd’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR). Since February 2017, the DoEd has steadily rolled back measures intended to protect vulnerable students in America’s schools, specifically students of color, students with disabilities, and female, LGBTQ, and economically disadvantaged students. For instance, the Secretary enacted policy changes that allowed the OCR to dismiss over five hundred civil rights complaints deemed “unreasonably burdensome,” including many suits filed by single organizations against multiple educational institutions—a longstanding legal practice used to expose patterns of systemic violations. She also delayed implementation of the previous Administration’s “disproportionality rule,” intended to standardize how states track things like the disproportionate placement of students of color in restrictive and/or exclusionary special education environments or the disproportionate use of unfair disciplinary measures on students from populations vulnerable to discrimination. These unjust practices violate the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandate to provide education to students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, contribute to the resegregation of K-12

schools, and set in motion processes that funnel students of color into America's notorious school-to-prison pipeline.

The current DoEd makes the disingenuous claim that decisions such as these will better serve and protect vulnerable student populations. To justify throwing out dozens of school discipline investigations, a spokesperson cited the legal maxim "justice delayed is justice denied"—a phrase famously associated with (and undoubtedly intended to evoke) Civil Rights legend Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." In keeping with the willfully ignorant practice of pretending race and racism do not exist to champion "colorblindness," the DoEd likewise argued that delaying requirements to track disproportionality in special education and school discipline protected students of color from being unfairly placed into a racial "quota" system. In other words—according to this spurious, circular logic—enforcing federal civil rights protections for students of color would unjustly single them out based on race so it is best to ignore racial injustice. After all, Martin Luther King, Jr. himself once shared his dream for the U.S. to become a nation where his children would "not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character," right? Under the guise of "concern," then, proponents of colorblindness suggest that acknowledging the mere existence of race—let alone addressing its salience in producing and maintaining social hierarchies and larger structures of power—is the equivalent of "being racist." (Obvious Side Note: being color conscious—informed about the long history and continued effects of race and racism—is decidedly anti-racist.)

Reflecting on the three-ring circus of the current Secretary of Education's tenure illuminates a number of issues. First, her wealth, privilege, and lockstep adherence to the President, the interests of the 1%, the privatization of schools, and education federalism (favoring the autonomy of states and local school boards over federal education policy) secured her position and the outsized influence she enjoys relative to her nonexistent experience as an educator. Next, her mastery over the "truth-is-not-truth" Orwellian distortions of reality used regularly by the current Administration when demonstrable facts fail to conveniently fit its agenda is a hallmark of anti-intellectualism. This categorically flies in the face of key principles of modern education like critical thinking, appreciation of diverse perspectives, and information literacy. Perhaps most significant of all, the Secretary's agenda and tactics reveal a crisis in educational leadership in the U.S. at the highest level, one often characterized by a blatant disregard for the complex ways that race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and disability status explicitly and implicitly shape educational experiences, practices, and policy.

It is precisely here that the articles in this forum, *Dismantling Ableism: The Moral Imperative for School Leaders*, make a significant intervention. They collectively demonstrate the power of theoretical frameworks like Disability Studies in Education (DSE) and DisCrit (Disability Studies + Critical Race Theory in Education) to critically examine these larger politics, histories, and power dynamics and situate contemporary education policy within this broader context. Individual teachers whose students benefit tremendously from their practice of DSE and DisCrit principles and pedagogy in the classroom, however, often experience

frustration and fatigue when principals, administrators, and others in positions of educational leadership fail to understand or only pay lip service to their commitment to educational inclusion and social justice.



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