

Rep. Pocan: Questions DeVos on guns in schools, invites her to tour low-performing voucher schools in Wisconsin

Posted on Wednesday, Mar 21, 2018

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WASHINGTON, DC - U.S. Representative Mark Pocan (WI-02) today pressed U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos on several issues, including her position on gun violence prevention, her support for school choice programs, and her failure to visit low-performing schools.

During the exchange, Pocan asked DeVos if she would meet with students from Parkland, Florida, to discuss gun violence, but DeVos refused to commit to an upcoming meeting. Pocan also asked DeVos why she has not visited low-performing schools. He then extended an invite for her to join him in Wisconsin for a visit to one of the many taxpayer funded voucher schools in Wisconsin that were rated by the state as “failing to meet expectations.”

<https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/-7tDAs9OTpzM/WrFsx35IfxI/AAAAAAAAA1A/Z8Yur9EdzmUYMLFjmbrpPYzjgkQDEWbUwCL0BGAYYCw/h720/2018-03-20.png>

Congressman Pocan speaking today at the Appropriations hearing.

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Here is the exchange, as delivered:

Pocan: "Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you, Madam Secretary, for being here. Last night on our Facebook page, I said you were coming before the committee and got over 100 different questions, but I'm going to try to cover some of the topics they covered.

"I was very heartened to hear you say that the budget is about students, not special interests - it's about the faces of the students. A lot of the questions came in around gun violence. They're concerned not just about the faces, but the hearts, and the minds, and the lives of the students. If you go to school in the morning, you're able to go home alive at the end of the day. And that hasn't been happening.

"You once in an interview said, 'I would imagine that there is probably a gun in the school to protect from potential grizzlies.' Is it still your opinion that we need guns in schools to protect from grizzlies?"

DeVos: "Thanks, Congressman, for that question. If I had it to do over today, I probably would have used a different example. The point was that if there are going to be guns in schools, they need to be in the hands of the right people, and those who are going to protect students and ensure their safety. And that is the point."

Pocan: "So I appreciate that because I agree, there is not a grizzly bear problem in this country, there's a gun violence problem in the country. And then a few weeks ago, the President seemed to be on board with some sensible alternatives and then he met with the NRA and the sensible alternatives went out the door. Are you a member of the NRA by any chance?"

DeVos: "I am not."

Pocan: "You are not? Okay. I was wondering, specifically, do you know how many school shootings and incidences involving guns have taken place in schools since you were confirmed last year?"

DeVos: "Too many."

Pocan: "Yeah, so it's over 85. In fact, that number this morning increased - at least two people were injured in Maryland, seventeen lives recently in Parkland. In your comments you made a comment about trying to prevent young people from getting guns. Does that mean that you support banning the purchase of guns for people under 21?"

DeVos: "The President has indicated support for that. I think it's an important issue for this body to deal with. I would like to think that this body and Congress could go ahead and get progress on some of the things that are broadly supported and I encourage that, and the President has certainly encouraged that."

Pocan: "And so you support that?"

DeVos: "The President has said that that should be part of the consideration. That's actually part of the study that the school safety commission will be looking at and making a recommendation on."

Pocan: "So you support that?"

DeVos: "The President has indicated his support."

Pocan: "I gotcha, I gotcha, okay so..."

DeVos: "I have not reached a conclusion myself"

Pocan: "Someday we will find out where you're on it, but the President supports it. I got it. This Friday, the Parkland students are going to be up here. Would you be willing to sit down? I know you had a meeting with the President, but you didn't get a lot of one-on-one time. These students would really like to be heard. I'm staying an extra day, just to meet with them. Would you be willing to meet with the Parkland students? We'd be glad to facilitate a meeting."

DeVos: "I look forward to meeting with Parkland students. I have actually talked with a few of them about meeting them in Parkland at a time that is workable for both of us."

Pocan: "Sure, are you available this Friday to meet with them when they're in town?"

DeVos: "I don't know. I can't say right now what my schedule is then."

Pocan: "If we could just follow-up with that, we would certainly appreciate it."

Pocan: "On voucher schools, I want to associate myself with the remarks from our Ranking Member of the Committee on the GAO report, because I do think there are concerns there. I know in another interview, you made a comment just recently that

you haven't visited poor-performing schools. I think that's another one you'd like to reel back."

DeVos: "As Secretary, I have made a point of visiting schools that are doing things creatively, innovatively, out-of-the-box thinking. I think it would be important to visit some poor-performing schools."

Pocan: "Great."

DeVos: "I think the question is, 'Will they let me in?'"

Pocan: "So that's the exact place I'm going, but you and I are on the same wavelength. So you're willing to meet with some schools that are poor-performing schools?"

DeVos: "Absolutely."

Pocan: "Okay, so there are, according to a recent article in the Milwaukee Journal (Sentinel), at least 25 choice schools, which I know you're a big advocate for, that are performing way below the standards and level they're supposed to.

"I would love to meet you in Wisconsin and one of them that ranks the lowest, recently said, 'We don't let people from the media in our building.' And they are the lowest of 121 schools in the Milwaukee area.

"I would love to go to one of those with you because I have seen the problems in my state, as you know we are one of the early adapters of the choice program – just to see exactly what that problem is. We have 140 private schools – voucher schools – statewide that couldn't be rated because they won't provide the information.

"Do you think that's right that the State of Wisconsin, as much as you want to give the state rights, can't even get the information from schools that are ultimately getting some sort of federal dollars because they are a choice program?"

DeVos: "Congressman, Wisconsin has legislated their program and their accountabilities to the..."

Pocan: "But do you think it is right? That is the question."

DeVos: "I think parents and I think taxpayers..."

Pocan: "Do you think it is right?"

DeVos: "I think parents and taxpayers need to have more information, not less. And the goal of this administration and this department is to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to access a great education."

Pocan: "So I'm going to take it that you think that they should have to report. Is that fair?"

DeVos: "I have been focused on ensuring that children and students and parents have opportunities to make the right education decision for them. And I support those parents in Wisconsin who have made choices for their children. I'm not going to comment on the Wisconsin method of reporting and accountability."

Pocan: "So you don't think those schools should have to provide the information?"

DeVos: "I think all parents need to have information and I think all taxpayers should have that information."

Pocan: "Okay, maybe if we get a second round, I can get more. Thank you."