



# Santa Barbara County Education Office

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## Bill Cirone op ed column

**To:** All newspapers  
Feb. 14, 2017 —Col. 16/17-18

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### Hopeful but vigilant

*By Bill Cirone, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools*

We strongly support children and public education, regardless of who is in charge at the federal level, but we must agree with the recent comments by Diane Ravitch, education historian and former U.S. assistant secretary of education. She expressed the feelings of so many educators and parents regarding the confirmation of Betsy DeVos as secretary of education when she said, “It is troubling and a sad day for American public education when a person who has repeatedly expressed contempt for public schools is confirmed as secretary of education.” Never a student, a parent, or school board member of public education, DeVos has “devoted her life’s work to tear down public education,” Ravitch said.

DeVos’s history of advocacy for privatization and for-profit charter schools, and her lack of respect for separation of church and state, are all troubling. As author Garrison Keillor wrote, “When you wage war on public schools you’re attacking the mortar that holds the community together.”

Our Founding Fathers created a country based on the radical idea that all people were created equal and should have input into their own governance. We would not be led by a monarch or a despot with concentrated power, as much of Europe was at the time.

Our citizens were provided with the right to vote for their representatives, and with that right came the responsibility to be educated.

The genius of our Founding Fathers is reflected in the documents they crafted and the democratic nation they built, and also in their realization that the power to vote had to be based on adequate knowledge and judgment. They decided that the way to make sure all citizens were equipped for the task was to provide free, universal education for every child. Thomas Jefferson said, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free ... it expects what never was and never will be.”

It is hard to imagine today how radical the idea of free universal education was at the time: By deeming that it was the responsibility of every adult to make sure that every child in the community had a free, public education, our founders were ensuring that democracy would succeed.

Public schools taught important subject matter and civic literacy, and they were also the glue that bound our country together — a shared and unifying experience, regardless of race, creed, or any other trait that separated us rather than binding us together as a community. Democracy at its best.

Over time, public schools evolved. Just as many people now choose what news they wish to watch, many parents now choose what subject matter they wish their children to learn. Homeschooling, charter schools, and private schools are viable alternatives for many families.

Many charter schools, including those in Santa Barbara County, have proven to be highly effective and successful. Many elsewhere have not. Widespread coverage of the investigation into charter schools in Los Angeles, for example, shows that serious malfeasance has reportedly occurred. Even charter school advocates expressed strong concern about DeVos. “At the risk of saying the obvious, we must have a secretary of education who believes in public education and the need to keep the public schools public,” said charter school champion Eli Broad.

We fully support parents’ ability to do what they feel is in their child’s best interest. We do believe, however, that all schools that receive public funds should be held accountable to the same standards. The outcome for children is too important to do anything less. We also will speak out if public schools come under attack, because they are too vital to our nation’s interests and to the best interests of our children and families.

Our stance remains nonpartisan. On one hand, as educators, we are troubled that the new secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, has no experience with public schools and apparently little knowledge of how they operate. We are troubled by her antipathy to public education and her support for allowing firearms in our schools. These troubling facts are likely why she received the lowest congressional support of any cabinet member in our nation’s history. Senators nationwide were bombarded with calls from concerned parents everywhere.

On the other hand, we support all individuals, regardless of party or ideology, who demonstrate they are advocates for ALL children and their education. It is our hope and expectation that Betsy DeVos will look to public education as part of the solution in these troubled times. This is an important time to support and involve teachers, our true community heroes, and to unite us in our quest to do what’s right for all our children. We will remain hopeful and vigilant. Our children’s future is too important to do anything less.

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