

# The DeVos Effect

## Introduction

For the past four decades, Betsy and Dick DeVos have been using their significant wealth and connections to influence politics in Michigan, and rarely for the better. Their national identity peaked in 2017 when Betsy was named President Trump's Secretary of Education, but this is hardly the family's first interaction with the relationship between questionable ethics, wealth, and politics.

Betsy's husband, Dick DeVos, is heir to the fortune made by his father in the creation of the multilevel marketing scheme known as Amway, an \$8.8 billion company<sup>1</sup>. This may give the impression that he's the source of wealth in the marriage, when in reality there's a steady stream of inheritance flowing in from both sides. Betsy DeVos's father was Edgar Prince, a successful auto-parts manufacturer who sold his company, The Prince Corporation, for \$1.35 billion in 1996, and her brother is Erik Prince, who founded Blackwater, a private military-contracting company (mercenaries for hire) and whose net worth exceeds \$2 billion. This generous amount of money leads to maximum donations from every member of the family.

## Meddling with Michigan

### Follow the Money

Beginning with Richard DeVos, Sr. and Edgar Prince, the DeVos/Prince family has always actively participated in their local elections. Recently, however, there has been an increase in contributions coming from Betsy and Dick. From 2015-2016, the couple managed to donate over \$14 million to political organizations including PACs, campaigns, and companies designed to support candidates, all Republican.

In the 2017, 30 of the 63 Republicans in the Michigan State House of Representatives had received a contribution between \$7,000 and \$9,000 from the DeVos's. Fifty of the Republican state judicial candidates between 2015 and 2016 had received direct donations from the family, and almost \$2 million (\$1,851,200) went to the Republican National Committee<sup>2</sup>. In those two years alone, the couple reported \$14,248,467.00 of donations, both state and federal<sup>3</sup>, a staggering amount capable of skewing a party towards one family's priorities, and elections towards a party.

### Day to Day Effect

Campaign donations can make an election, especially with down-ballot races, including district judges and state senators. Name recognition is crucial. Flyers, events, and staff require funding, so when one candidate is struggling to keep their doors open and their opponent is flooding mailboxes with literature, ideals may no longer matter. Donors are usually only willing to invest thousands in candidates who will support their agenda. The DeVos's agenda includes attacks on Michigan infrastructure, schools, and anything that doesn't fit with their conservative Christian values, particularly minority-, LGBTQ+ and pro-choice rights.

The DeVos agenda is best shown in their donations to organizations, the highlights of which can be found in an ACLU report released prior to Betsy DeVos's confirmation hearing<sup>4</sup>. The release shows that she has significantly contributed to at least nine pro-life organizations, two organizations that work to limit affirmative action and voting rights, and upwards of seven anti-LGTBQ+ organizations (one of which is classified as an extremist hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center).

## With Great Power Comes Few Civil Liberties

Discrimination has been a hot topic within the Department of Education (DOE) recently. As Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos has announced that the DOE will no longer be investigating complaints against schools refusing to respect the gender identities of their trans-students and which bathroom they feel most comfortable using<sup>5</sup>. She has also refused to look into complaints of racial discrimination<sup>6</sup>, letting regional offices decide whether or not to file reports to Department officials, decreasing the number of active investigations. Within the DOE resides the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), a division responsible for ensuring schools provide equal access and civil rights and respond to complaints appropriately. Their purview includes LGBTQ+ and racial discrimination, sexual harassment, and improper school discipline. DeVos is now in charge of the staff and budget at the OCR and is making crippling decisions including a \$1.7 million budget cut, forcing staff layoffs and a lack of resources at a time when complaints are on the rise (there was a 70% increase in complaints between 2009-2015). Beyond that, newly appointed staff members don't provide much assurance for the future; Candice Jackson, the new assistant secretary of the OCR, filed discrimination complaints for being white while studying at Stanford, and has suggested they no longer publish lists of schools under investigation for sexual assault claims.

The DeVos family has reached beyond the bounds of their own state to affect change on a national level. Between 2015 and 2016, they assisted state candidates including Eric Greitens running for Governor of Missouri (he won, then resigned in June 2018 due to sexual and fiscal misconduct<sup>7</sup>), and Eric Holcomb running for governor of Indiana (he won). Both received donations close to \$100,000. The DeVos's also supported twelve US Senate seats, including Marco Rubio in Florida, Bill Cassidy in Louisiana, and Mitch McConnell in Kentucky, leading Betsy DeVos to state that "[Her family] was the largest single contributor of soft money" to Republicans<sup>8</sup>. This progression out of their region is yielding ever-longer inroads toward greater influence. Each winning candidate is another voice this self-anointed family has in Washington to advance their right-wing agenda, an agenda that has already proven so destructive in Michigan.

## Sources

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/amway-dick-devos-betsy-marriage-relationship-husband-wife-2018-2#those-werent-the-only-things-the-couple-had-in-common-betsys-father-ed-prince-was-a-wealthy-manufacturer-who-donated-a-lot-of-money-to-conservative-causes-5>

<sup>2</sup> <http://mcfn.org/node/6043/devos-family-made-14-million-in-political-contributions-in-the-last-2-years-alone>

<sup>3</sup> <http://mcfn.org/node/6044/devos-giving-2015-2016-pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aclu.org/other/betsy-devos-facts>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aclu.org/blog/lgbt-rights/lgbt-youth/betsy-devos-denies-trans-students-basic-rights>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/news/2017/07/12/435671/betsy-devos-secretary-discrimination/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/29/us/eric-greitens-resigns.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/devos-family-campaign-contributions/>