

DeVos' diversion of public dollars

Response to Jan. 23 blog post, "Prominent Philadelphia charter players have varying opinions of DeVos" by Dale Mezzacappa.

I think it's very clear what Betsy DeVos will do – because she's been doing it for 20 years. She has quite a long record of supporting the diversion of public dollars toward private, for-profit education. That is her mission – a Crusade-like campaign to divert public dollars into religious and private schooling regardless of student outcome.

The current president's \$20 billion federal voucher proposal is precisely the type of policy DeVos and her organization, American Federation for Children, have supported in states throughout the country. So this idea that we should somehow wait and see what she'll do is a farce. Someone whose life goal is to dismantle public education should not be the secretary of education. Period.

Brett Schaeffer

The writer is a policy analyst in the office of Pennsylvania State Sen. Vincent Hughes, Senate Democratic Appropriations Committee.

Early interventions are necessary

Response to Jan. 4 blog post, "It's opening day for expanded Philly pre-K" by Avi Wolfman-Arent.

I would like to point out the positives of early childhood education and the school mentioned in this article – SPIN preschool. The most important aspect of this school is that it is an "inclusive program" which provides autistic children and children with other disabilities to be with "typically developing students." That is an issue which is dear to my heart and one which I plan to do much writing about.

Early interventions for children on the autism spectrum are absolutely necessary. So is their experience with "typically developing children" absolutely necessary for their development of language skills and their overcoming of their "social anxiety."

That is important and should be part of our public discussion.

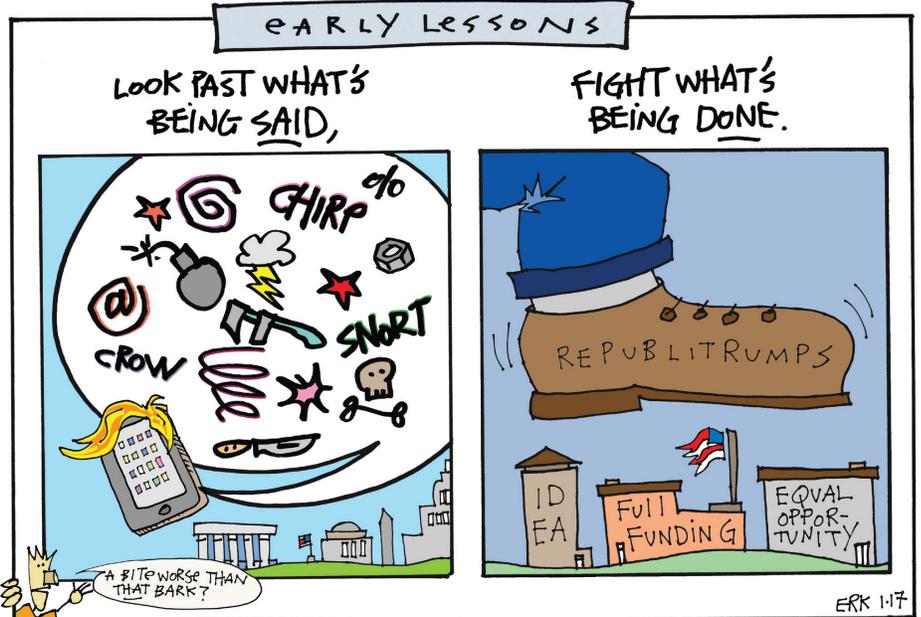
Rich Migliore

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Students with allergies protected by law from dangerous reactions, bias

by Morgen Black-Smith and David J. Berney

For some students with food allergies, school can be a dangerous place. Parents of these students know all too well that exposing their children to the wrong foods can cause symptoms ranging from rashes, to labored breathing, to anaphylactic shock and even death.

Here are several basic steps that you can take to keep your food-allergic child safe.

- First, work with your pediatrician or allergist to learn which foods trigger your child's allergic reaction, what the reaction's symptoms are, and what to do if a reaction takes place.
- Second, meet with school staff to advise them of your student's allergy and collaborate with them to develop a food-allergy plan for avoiding exposure to the allergen and taking necessary actions in case of an emergency.
- Finally, teach your child – in age-appropriate ways – how to self-advocate and stay safe at school.

In addition to taking those steps, parents of students with severe food allergies can turn to the protections in federal civil rights laws to help keep their children safe. Some parents and schools may not think of a student's allergic reaction as a disability, but if that allergy can result in severe, life-threatening reactions, the protections of these federal laws apply.

The primary federal law that can apply to students with severe food allergies is Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Any school that receives federal funds from the Department of Education must comply with Section 504. In Pennsylvania, this typically includes all public schools, all public charter schools, and some private schools.

Section 504 was written to ensure that students with disabilities can participate fully in all regular aspects of the school day. A written Section 504 plan outlines the accommodations that the student needs to attend school safely.

Any parents who believe their child may qualify for a 504 plan should contact the school's Section 504 coordinator and request such a plan. The school may ask for medical information from your child's pediatrician or allergist documenting the nature and extent of the allergy. Once the disability is substantiated, the school will create a written 504 plan.

Every 504 plan is different, depending on the student's individual needs. Here are some examples of information that could be included:

- The content and frequency of school-staff training about the nature of the student's allergy, what symptoms to look for, and how to respond in the case of an emergency.
- Where EpiPens or other medication will be located throughout the school and how staff will be trained in their use.
- What food-handling protocols are necessary in the classroom and school cafeteria.
- What role the parent and student will take in managing the student's allergy at school.

If a student also has an Emergency Care Plan or Individualized Healthcare Plan, those plans can be incorporated into a 504 plan. But a 504 plan is different from those plans because it is designed not only to keep students safe, but also to protect their rights.

A 504 plan is a legally binding document. It offers legal protections to the family if the school does not implement the plan and holds the school accountable for any failures in implementation. In addition, a 504 plan can help ensure that a student with a severe food allergy is not discriminated against at school. For example, students cannot be excluded from activities like a class party or holiday celebration because of their allergy.

No plan can guarantee a student's safety at school. But the protections in federal civil rights laws can be a helpful tool for families of students with severe food allergies.

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