

Hundreds protest visit by DeVos

By Laura Barrett and Scott McLennan

Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has the dubious distinction of being the most unpopular Cabinet secretary in the Trump administration. According to a *Politico* poll released on Sept. 27, only 28 percent of the public gave her a favorable rating.

As if to confirm that figure, hundreds of public education supporters protested DeVos' policies the next day outside Harvard's Kennedy School in Cambridge, where the secretary was the featured speaker on a panel loaded with school privatization advocates. Protesters excoriated her plans to divert public funds to privately run schools and her decision to roll back Obama-era protections for sexual assault survivors on college campuses.

While MTA members, students and other education advocates were protesting and chanting outside on JFK Street, Harvard students inside the lecture hall stood up midway through DeVos' talk and silently unrolled a series of banners, including two that read: "Education Justice Is Racial Justice" and "Protect Survivors' Rights." Many in the audience snapped their fingers to demonstrate their approval of the protest.

Outside, MTA President Barbara Madeloni was one of the lead speakers at the rally, which was organized on short notice by the Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance and Harvard University student organizations.

Madeloni cited DeVos' track record in her home state of Michigan, where she led a campaign to massively expand charter schools, leaving district public schools in financial shambles. Madeloni told the crowd that it is time to fight "millionaires and billionaires coming after public education."

She also talked about the similarity between policies advocated by DeVos and Paul Sagan, chair of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. Sagan, like DeVos, is a big supporter of charter schools even though he is charged with overseeing and supporting all public schools in the state. Sagan donated \$496,000 to Families for Excellent Schools — Advocacy in support of Question 2, last year's failed campaign to lift the cap on charter schools.

In September, the Office of Campaign and Political Finance levied a record fine against FESA for failing to disclose the source of millions of dollars channeled to the Yes on 2 effort. Sagan's donations were among the pile of "dark money" contributed through FESA.

Many MTA activists at the rally waved signs that read "Dump DeVos/Dump Sagan: Public Funds 4 Public Schools."

"This is a fight for something bigger," Madeloni said to cheers from the crowd. She called the privatization policies supported by DeVos and Sagan a civil rights issue.



Belmont Education Association Vice President Denise LaPolla, at left in the top photo, was among the many educators who joined the protest against a visit to Harvard by U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. MTA President Barbara Madeloni, at right in the bottom photo, linked DeVos and Paul Sagan, chair of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, as policymakers seeking to privatize public education.

Photos by Laura Barrett

Many of the college students present were upset about the decision by DeVos to rewrite Title IX guidance on how colleges should adjudicate rape and harassment claims.

"She can't stack the system against the students Title IX is meant to serve," said Amelia Goldberg of Our Harvard Can Do Better.

On Oct. 19, women's rights activists and student plaintiffs filed suit in U.S. District Court in Boston challenging the Trump administration's pending guidance changes.

Other higher education policies advocated by President Donald Trump and DeVos were also under attack at the Sept. 28 rally.

Zac Bears, executive director of PHENOM, the Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts, criticized the administration for suspending rules protecting students who had been defrauded by for-profit colleges, attempting to limit student loan repayment options, and trying to cut billions of

dollars from federal student aid. "Betsy DeVos sided with the Trump universities of this country and against students who had been defrauded," said Bears. "The DeVos agenda is a direct assault on the students and families who are struggling under the heavy burden of high costs and massive student debt at public colleges and universities here in Massachusetts."

Graciela Mohamedi, a Rockland Senior High School science teacher, closed out the rally with an impassioned rejection of the DeVos agenda.

"No to rollbacks on protections for sexual assault survivors," she said. "No to ignoring the voices of students of color. No to removing funding and accessibility to special education programs and disability initiatives. And No to turning our schools into another way for you and your billionaire buddies like Paul Sagan to further line your pockets with hard-earned taxpayer money! No! No! No! No!"