

Sen. Susan Collins' remarks as delivered Feb. 1, 2017

Sen. Collins: Madam president, I ask unanimous consent that preceding's under the call be dispensed with.

The presiding officer: Without objection.

Sen. Collins: Thank you, madam president. Madam President, I come to the floor to announce a very difficult decision that I have made, and that is to vote against the confirmation of Betsy Devos to be our nation's next secretary of education. Madam President, this is not a decision that I've made lightly. I have a great deal of respect for Mrs. Devos. I believe that she is a good person. I know that she cares deeply about the children of this nation. But for the reasons that I will explain, I simply cannot support her confirmation.

Sen. Collins: Madam president, later today the senate will vote on a motion to proceed to the Devos nomination, and I will vote to proceed to the nomination because I believe that presidents are entitled to considerable deference in the selection of cabinet members, regardless of which political party is in power, and that each and every senator should have the right to cast his or her vote on nominees for the cabinet. That is why during president Obama's administration, I voted for procedural motions, including cloture, to allow the president's nominees for secretary of defense and for secretary of labor to receive up-or-down votes by the full senate even though I ultimately voted against those two nominees on the senate floor. At the time, madam president, I stated that it is appropriate for every senator to have an opportunity to vote for or against an individual cabinet member, and I still believe that that is the right approach. Now let me again make clear what I said at the beginning of my remarks and which explains why this has been a decision that I've not made lightly. I know that Mrs. Devos cares deeply about children. I recognize that she's devoted much time and resources to try to improve the education of at-risk children in cities whose public schools have failed them. And I commend her for those efforts.

I wrote to Mrs. Devos seeking her assurances in writing that she would not support any federal legislation mandating that states adopt vouchers nor would she condition federal funding on the presence of voucher programs in states. She has provided that commitment, and I would ask unanimous consent that the exchange of correspondence with Mrs. Devos be entered into the record at the conclusion of my statement.

The presiding officer: Without objection.

Sen. Collins: Nevertheless, madam president, like all of us, Mrs. Devos is the product of her experience. She appears to view education through the lens of her experience of promoting alternatives to public education in Detroit and other cities where she has, no doubt, done valuable work. Her concentration on charter schools and vouchers, however, raises the question about whether or not she fully appreciates that the secretary of education's primary focus must be on helping states and communities, parents, teachers, school board administrators, school board members and administrators strengthen our public schools. While it is unrealistic and unfair to

expect a nominee to know the details of all the programs under the jurisdiction of the department of education, I am troubled and surprised by Mrs. Devos' apparently lack of if a mill -- lack of familiarity with the landmark law the individuals with disabilities act, known as idea, that guarantees a free and appropriation to children with special needs. The mission of the department of education is broad, but supporting public education is at its core. I'm concerned that Mrs. Devos' lack of experience with public schools will make it difficult for her to fully understand, identify and assist with those challenges, particularly for our rural schools in states like Maine.

In keeping with my past practice, I will vote today to proceed to debate on Mrs. Devos' nomination, but, madam president, I will not, I cannot vote to confirm her as our nation's next secretary of education. Madam president, I yield the floor.