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Testimony of Sarah Vigrass National Education Association a & California Teachers Association Member

Hello, my name is Sarah Vigrass. I am a fourth and fifth grade teacher and I live in Riverside, CA. For the past ten years I have worked at California Virtual Academies or CAVA, an online charter school managed by K12 Inc., a for profit education company. Betsy DeVos and her family were early investors in K12 Inc. What I have witnessed with the involvement of for-profit companies in my school has me deeply concerned about what an education department led by Betsy DeVos will mean for students. Education should be focused solely on students—and their best interests. Schools like mine, however, are beholden executives and shareholders who view kids not as tomorrow’s leaders and professionals but as today’s revenue. When shareholders are prioritized over the needs of our students, kids lose. In California, a significant stream of public money that is meant for our students is being siphoned off to corporations. Over the years I have seen a steady decline in the amount and quality of materials our students receive. Many textbooks and lessons are online only, despite parent requests for hard copy versions to help them help their children. K12 expects our families to pay out of pocket for these materials that should be provided for them. This should never happen given that these are public schools.

Teachers can’t properly teach when the focus of the school environment is maximizing profit. Our teachers are overburdened doing clerical duties with very little time to teach. Morale is abysmal and teacher turnover is sky-high. Some of our students have had as many as five teachers in one year. I have chosen to remain because I believe students need consistency and stability to succeed.

K12 was the subject of an investigation by the California Attorney General for allegedly providing parents misleading information about hidden costs, parent satisfaction, student academic progress, and their graduates’ eligibility to attend colleges and universities in the California state system. Currently CAVA and related charter schools are undergoing an audit conducted by the California State Controller’s office due to serious concerns with their practices.

While I feel that charter schools and virtual education do fill a need for some students, there has to be sensible regulation in the charter industry to ensure there is transparency and accountability. The charter school landscape in my state has become a Wild West of sorts, with unqualified operators opening charter schools with little oversight from the authorizing districts. After a few years of financial enrichment via our tax dollars while delivering a cut-rate education, they reconstitute and rename themselves and repeat the process. And as we’ve seen in other states like Michigan, California is not alone in this for-profit education model.

The fact that Mrs. DeVos has a long record privatizing public schools without public accountability is very troubling to me as I have seen first-hand the problems this creates and how it shortchanges students. Wall Street sees clearly that the incoming administration and Mrs. DeVos view our nation's children as a way to make money. She has consistently pushed a corporate agenda to privatize, de-professionalize and impose cookie-cutter solutions to public education. As a teacher myself, I would expect the next Secretary of Education to have at least a modicum of experience in public education. Mrs. DeVos has absolutely none, and that is concerning. I've been on airplanes before, and built a few paper ones, but that doesn't mean I'm qualified to pilot my flight home.

The Trump-DeVos vision for education is wrong for students and public education. It is centered on privatization schemes that do nothing to help our most vulnerable students while ignoring and exacerbating glaring opportunity gaps. As an educator, a parent, and an American, it saddens me to see this great institution that should be the bedrock foundation of this nation placed in charge of those who seek to erode and profit from it. That is why I urge the Senate to oppose Betsy DeVos as Education Secretary.