News



Education Secretary Betsy DeVos waits to testify before a House Committee on Appropriation subcommittee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington on March 20, 2018. (AP/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

Jack Jenkins

View Author Profile

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — April 4, 2018
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A faith-based education advocacy group is criticizing Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos for her recent comments regarding race and school discipline and is circulating a petition on the matter that has garnered thousands of signatures.

The controversy surrounds a March 11 appearance by DeVos on the "60 Minutes" television program, where she was asked about the possibility of the Trump administration rescinding Obama-era guidance designed to reduce suspensions and expulsions of minority students. When interviewer Leslie Stahl inquired whether black children being punished more harshly for the same incident compared with white children could be considered institutional racism, DeVos did not directly respond, saying, "We're studying it carefully."

Nicole Baker Fulgham, founder and president of The Expectations Project, published an open letter shortly after the segment aired, criticizing the remarks. In the letter, Fulgham identifies as "a fellow person of faith" — a reference to DeVos' very public Christian faith — and says she is "disappointed" with the secretary's responses.

"Research from your own Department of Education shows African-American students are three times more likely than their white peers to be expelled or suspended, and that these disparities are not explained by more frequent or serious misbehavior by students of color," wrote Fulgham, a former public schoolteacher, citing a March 2014 report from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights.

She added: "Our scripture says we're all created in the image of God and are, therefore, of equal and immeasurable worth in the eyes of our Creator. So when African-American kids in our schools are treated differently than white kids we should all be able to agree this is wrong."

Advertisement

In a separate Facebook video, Fulgham says she was "heartbroken" by DeVos' comments, noting, "Punishing black students and white students differently for the same behavior in a way that's measurable across the entire system is literally the definition of institutional racism."

Representatives from The Expectations Project say the letter has accumulated nearly 15,000 online signatures in support.

The day after the "60 Minutes" interview aired, the White House declared that DeVos will lead a school safety commission in the wake of the Parkland high school shooting that will be charged in part with examining the "repeal of the Obama administration's 'Rethink School Discipline' policies" — which appears to include the disciplinary guidance.

Department of Education officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment on this story.