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*On behalf of the Union for Reform Judaism, whose over 900 congregations across North America encompass 1.5 million Reform Jews, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, which represents over 2,000 Reform rabbis, we submit these questions regarding the nomination of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education. We hope Committee Members will make use of them during her confirmation hearing.*

*The Reform Movement is the largest denomination in American Jewish life and strongly advocates for robust separation of church-state and free exercise of religion. We do so both as a religious minority and in recognition that these constitutional protections have ensured the religious diversity and pluralism that are hallmarks of the nation. We oppose the use of taxpayer dollars to fund private, sectarian education, believing that members of particular faiths should fund religious institutions, not the government.*

*We are also deeply concerned about government-organized religious expression, particularly in the context of public education. Public schools ought to be open and accepting of students of all backgrounds and beliefs, and not endorse or sponsor religious observance or prayer of any kind.*

1. Public education is one of the cornerstones of our nation. Public schools serve students of all economic, geographic, ethnic, religious, gender, and racial backgrounds. History has shown that American public schools are a significant unifying factor in our society, bringing together students of diverse backgrounds. What are your top three priorities for strengthening public education in the United States?
2. Voucher programs divert desperately needed resources away from the public school system that serves all children and toward private schools that educate only a select few of the nation's children. You have been a strong advocate for vouchers; how do you plan to address proposals to increase access to school vouchers while also protecting public education?
3. A central principle of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause is that members of particular faiths, and not the government, should fund religious institutions. When vouchers are used towards expenses related to religious school education they become an indirect government funding of sectarian institutions. How do you respond to concerns about the use of taxpayer dollars for sectarian education?
4. Government funding for religious education undermines the First Amendment and harms religious liberty. Since the government has a right, in fact an obligation, to demand that the institutions which it funds meet certain requirements or standards, strings are attached to government money. Religious schools stand to lose their autonomy in areas of single-sex education, hiring procedures, and curriculum decisions. Such control would not be beneficial for either religious organizations or



*The Religious Action Center pursues social justice and religious liberty by mobilizing the Jewish community and serving as its advocate in Washington, D.C. The Center is led by the Commission on Social Action of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Union for Reform Judaism (and its affiliates) and is supported by the congregations of the Union.*



the government. How do you plan to ensure both educational standards and the autonomy of religious schools that accept vouchers?

5. Vouchers do not guarantee a student any type of school choice. Rather, they contribute to the monetary means of a family to send their child to a private school if that school accepts the child. Every child counts, yet vouchers only raise the hopes of a select few. Vouchers offer private schools a greater choice than they do the students. Many students will still be ineligible to attend many of the private schools because of the schools' exclusive admission policies. What are your plans to address these inequities?
6. Multiple studies show that vouchers channel taxpayer dollars to schools where students can be discriminated against or denied admission. Furthermore, voucher programs do not guarantee greater achievement. The final report by the U.S. Department of Education on the District of Columbia voucher program found that students who received vouchers to attend private schools were at similar levels in math and reading four-five years later as students who sought the vouchers but who were not awarded them.<sup>1</sup> Vouchers divert public funds from public education, do not guarantee improved educational achievement, and allow schools to cherry pick the students they wish to serve. How do you align your support for vouchers with your responsibility to ensure the best educational outcomes for all American students?
7. The Supreme Court has ruled in *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe* (2000) that school-sponsored prayer, even if student-led, is unconstitutional. What is your position on teacher- or school employee-led prayer in public schools? How do you plan to ensure compliance with these Supreme Court decisions?
8. How will you address accommodating the needs of public school students who belong to minority religious groups?
9. One of the central reasons why school-sponsored prayer and religious education are not permitted during school hours with students is because students are a "captive audience," and religious instruction can have a coercive effect on them. How will you address calls to infuse secular education with religious teachings? What is your position on teaching creationism, or other non-secular topics in schools whose purpose is to further one religious view, rather than teaching about religion in the context of other classes, i.e. history or literature? What safeguards will you maintain or create to ensure a robust separation between church and state in public schools?

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<sup>1</sup> [U.S. Department of Education, "Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report," p. xv.](#)