

Dear Ms. Betsy Devos, Secretary of Education,

You are currently the appointed leader of our nation's schools, and in the last week or so, almost all of the schools in our country were forced to close because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In an attempt to support children, teachers have worked to shift to an on-line form of instruction that most have never tried before. This is a daunting task. What, as their leader, have you offered to support them?

Nothing.

No vision.

So I will loan you mine.

It's just three things, really, and it has the power to change this world, one child at a time.

First, we must recognize that literacy is power. The ability to read, write, and speak well is the foundation of continuing to learn, of being empowered to challenge existing systems and structures of inequity and division in this country, and to develop the vision to create new possibilities, new solutions to problems, and new ways to imagine a better world. Literacy ignites all of those things.

So what do our children need right now? Access to interesting things to read.

You could arrange for little free (and sanitized) books in neighborhood libraries all over this country. You could mobilize people to build them and then to stock them with titles from lists like *We Need Diverse Books*. In this time of crisis, we could turn the corner on access to books that empower, encourage, and stimulate the imaginations of all children. They would have fairy tales and science and the history of conflicts or the autobiographies of leaders in their hands beside collections of poems and short stories and fantasy. Students could find their preferences, develop deep connections to authors, and return the next day to find even more.

Teachers and librarians could support this effort with daily read alouds on their school platforms. Teachers could model the ways they think about a book and invite students to share their thinking. Imagine the power of this: you, the Federal Department of Education's top leader—could solve the problem of access to interesting books!—and then our nation's teachers would work to engage kids in reading and thinking about those books.

Secondly, you could provide access to authors and illustrators (and pay them!) for all students. Imagine if we tuned in each morning to hear Lin-Manuel Miranda share how he created one song from the genius play *Hamilton*, or Kwame Alexander discuss the way words and images work together in *The Undeclared*, and then the next day Jacqueline Woodson showed us how she planned her memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming* or

Jesmyn Ward helped us to understand how she organized the narratives in the novels that have earned her two National Book Awards. My heart beats faster just thinking about the power of this! The children in our country would develop a vision for what it means to live a creative life. Passion is contagious.

Our nation's authors could help children imagine ways to write, and then our nation's teachers could model how to get started. Teachers could offer invitations to emulate the moves writers show us: how do they find ideas? How do they develop them? Revise them? This is joyful work. We want to inspire our students to create during this homebound time, not to just passively consume whatever content comes through a screen. As poet Andrea Gibson said, "We have to create. It is the only thing louder than destruction."

Here's my last thing. You, with the power and the dollars you currently have control of, could empower the brilliant tech minds in this country to create platforms where young writers could share their creations and learn from each other all across the world. We could make available to all students the picture books, graphic novels, memoirs, poetry, historical fiction, podcasts and digital compositions created by our nation's young people. This flood of creation would be so captivating and original that all kids would hunger for more. They would read more, create more, and return to school empowered to learn more.

That would be some legacy, Ms. DeVos. I offer it to you free of charge.

Penny Kittle  
Teacher  
North Conway, New Hampshire  
March 27, 2020