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NEWS

Magnet schools attracted big speaker, got media spotlight

MSA Executive Director Todd Mann scored speech by Betsy DeVos, and earned favorable mention in Trump address to Congress



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By [William Ehart](#)

With the nation's capital still coming to grips with a Trump administration, and advocates training their fire on controversial Secretary of Education nominee Betsy DeVos, a small school group scored a big coup.

The \$1.4 million-revenue Magnet Schools of America got DeVos to agree to give her first public address following confirmation at the organization's annual policy conference in early February.

DeVos is a proponent of vouchers that parents can use to send children to private schools—something that public-school advocates, including MSA, oppose.

It was an unorthodox move that paid big dividends for MSA Executive Director Todd Mann, CEO of the Todd Mann Management Group. He and his company have managed MSA for three years.

Mann says DeVos' visit earned heavy national media coverage, likely caused Trump to mention magnet schools in his first address to Congress, and has positioned MSA as an important coalition partner for larger associations in the education space.

"I knew that my members were not in favor of anything they were seeing, and they wanted me to be very actively against the new administration," Mann told CEO Update.

"But I said this is not the time. We are small. We don't gain anything by doing that. Let's first have a conversation and see if we can make some inroads," he said.

Media scrum

DeVos' speech came just days after she was briefly prevented by protesters from entering a Washington, D.C., public school, an incident she mentioned in her speech, faulting those she called "hostile" to change.

Mann said he told DeVos the MSA conference would be a good forum for her, given all the divisive rhetoric, and she agreed.

The charged event drew 10 television networks and 35 representatives of national media organizations, Mann said. DeVos did not take media questions—a task Mann happily assumed as it propelled MSA into the national spotlight. He spent a half-hour taking print media questions after her speech.

"I accomplished two things for my membership. We were in 75 newspapers around the country. We were on local and national evening news, so we elevated awareness of magnet schools and established communications with the administration," Mann said.

Hosting DeVos helped keep magnet schools included in the public perception of "school choice," of which she is a major proponent. Magnet schools are within the public-school system and are racially diverse but represent an option for parents who want an educational choice beyond the schools in their neighborhoods.

In his Feb. 28 address to Congress—widely perceived as among Trump's best speeches—the president gave a brief but precious nod to magnet schools.

"I am calling upon members of both parties to pass an education bill that funds school choice for disadvantaged youth ... families should be free to choose the public, private, charter, magnet, religious or home school that is right for them," Trump said.

Mann called the education budget Trump recently proposed "skinny," and said funding for magnet schools would be on the agenda for his expected follow-up meeting with DeVos.

But Mann had to bring his members and the event attendees on board before DeVos took to the podium.

“I had to let them know why we were doing this because without hearing it from me in advance, they would have thought, ‘My God, have you gone over to the other side?’

“Second, I had to communicate with all the attendees. I said, ‘Listen, this is our chance, you cannot boo her, nor am I going to let you ask questions,’” he said.

Instead, Mann collected questions from the audience and posed selected ones to DeVos.

Access to DeVos has enhanced MSA’s value as a coalition partner to teachers’ unions such as the American Federation of Teachers and other public school associations such as the National School Boards Association and the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

“We have only seven staff, and one person does legislation as well as communications,” he said.

“We have to be able to leverage other groups because we are just too small and we don’t have the resources to have our own team.

“Now, (AFT President) Randi Weingarten refers to me and my comments. She’s been tweeting me. That’s how I know we’ve started gaining some sway,” Mann said. “I am now being invited to speak at all the other big education associations.

“As a small association, we have to do bolder things,” he said.

“We gain nothing by going out early and saying we are against what they propose. The strategy I encouraged my board to follow was to say, ‘Let’s keep our powder dry and see if we can establish some communications and get on the agenda, and that’s how we will succeed if we are to succeed at all.’”

CEO Update asks readers for ideas about issues particular to smaller associations that we may discuss in our Small Group, Big Idea feature. Please email info@ceoupdate.com.