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OPINION

Dr. Jill Biden and the problem with education degrees

By JONATHAN ZIMMERMAN

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS | DEC 15, 2020 AT 5:00 AM



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President-Elect Biden to Name Miguel Cardona as Education Secretary

Cheddar is joined by Eliza Collins, politics reporter for the Wall Street Journal, to discuss the latest on who Joe Biden is expected to pick as his new education secretary, and what the new year-end spending bill will include for higher education.

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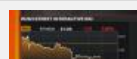
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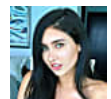
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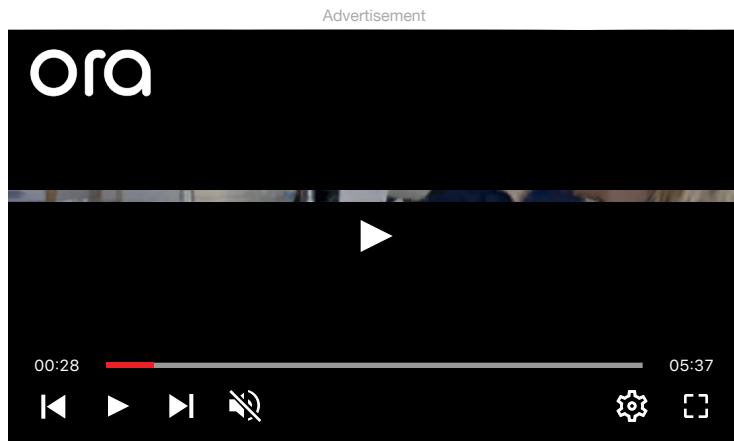


So here's a question, culled from our latest Twitter war: If Jill Biden held a doctoral degree in economics or biology instead of in education, would Joseph Epstein have derided her for employing the title "Dr."?

I doubt it. And that's the question that's mostly missing from the controversy over Epstein's op-ed about Biden, which went crazy-viral after the Wall Street Journal

posted it on Friday night. Unless you live under a rock — or stay off social media — you already know that Epstein wrote that Biden's use of "Dr" sounded "fraudulent, not to

already know that Epstein wrote that Biden's use of "Dr." sounded "ridiculous, not to say a touch comic." And if that wasn't enough, he instead addressed Biden with a more colloquial title: "kiddo."



Sexist? You bet. But this isn't just a matter of a man mocking a woman, as online critics correctly noted. It's also about the poor reputation of education degrees, like the one Jill Biden earned from the University of Delaware in 2007.

And yes, the two problems are connected. Although almost nobody is willing to say this out loud right now, doctorates in education too often lack the intellectual rigor, difficulty and originality of advanced degrees in other fields. And that, in turn, reflects how education was typecast as a "female profession" from the dawn of our history.

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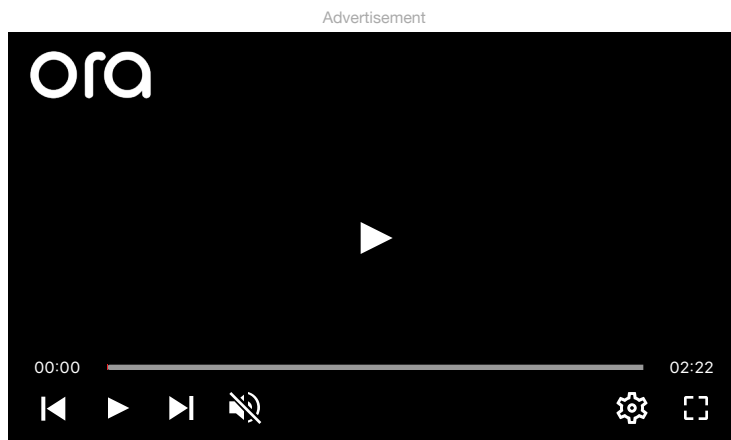
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Jill Biden speaks to supporters while campaigning for her husband during a drive in rally Sunday, Nov. 1, in Tampa, Fla. (Chris O'Meara/AP)

By 1850, the United States enrolled a larger fraction of its children in schools than any other country on Earth. Their teachers were mostly women in their teen years (yes, you read that right) or their early 20s. To operate so many schools, we needed a large, easily mobilized workforce that wouldn't break the bank. Young women fit the bill: You could hire them for a few years, before they got married, and you could pay them less than men.

That's the place to start, if you want to understand why American teachers usually receive less pay — and, most of all, less status — than their counterparts in other Western democracies. And it also helps explain the fate of education schools, the institutions that developed to prepare these mostly female teachers for the classroom.



Begun as so-called “normal” schools, these institutions were rarely selective. They couldn't be, because the country needed so many teachers. So they typically took all comers, which is never a good formula for creating a high-status profession.

And once they got folded into universities, they also became cash cows. The constant demand for new teachers translated into a steady stream of tuition dollars, which was irresistible to revenue-hungry administrators. In short order, ed schools were subsidizing other parts of the university.

Should we be surprised, then, that the degrees offered in education were often of lower quality? At the undergraduate level, students who majored in education came in with lower grades and test scores than those in the liberal arts. And when ed schools established graduate degrees — mainly to train principals and superintendents — these programs likewise lacked the depth and prestige of advanced degrees in other parts of the university.



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Their typical student was someone like Jill Biden, who spent years in the classroom before earning two M.A. degrees and eventually her doctorate in educational leadership. Her dissertation — about student retention in community colleges — was 129 pages long, including the table of contents and footnotes. In my own field, history, [most dissertations are twice or three times that length](#).

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To be fair, Jill Biden's degree is an Ed.D. rather than a Ph.D., which typically requires a longer piece of research. But even here, the ed school lags behind. With less money to distribute in fellowships, it can't compete with other fields for the best Ph.D. candidates. Nor do most ed schools demand the same level of knowledge (as certified by so-called "comprehensive" examinations) or the same depth of research as other Ph.D. programs.

And yes, these distinctions matter. So long as education remains the poor cousin in the university family, we won't attract the strongest people into it. Countries where educators are highly respected — think Finland, or South Korea — create higher barriers of entry into the field, at every level. Oh, and did I mention that they pay their K-12 teachers more, as well?

Let me be clear: I have only the deepest respect for Jill Biden, who earned multiple degrees while teaching and raising her daughter and step-sons. And if she wants to be called "Dr.," that's what we should call her. Full stop. It was both silly and sexist of Ioselh Enstein to suggest otherwise

Joseph Epstein to suggest otherwise.

But we should also use this moment to commit ourselves to raising the status of education, which affects each and every one of us. All men and women are created equal, but all fields of study are not. We shouldn't let Epstein's swipes at Jill Biden divert us from that.

Zimmerman teaches education and history at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of "The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America."

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