

Exterminating Public Schools in America

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The “Tough Choices or Tough Times” report of the National Commission on Skills in the Workplace, funded in large part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and signed by a bipartisan collection of prominent politicians, businesspeople, and urban school superintendents, called for a series of measures including:

- (a) replacing public schools with what the report called “contract schools”, which would be charter schools writ large;
- (b) eliminating nearly all the powers of local school boards – their role would be to write and sign the authorizing agreements for the “contract schools”;
- (c) eliminating teacher pensions and slashing health benefits; and
- (d) forcing all 10th graders to take a high school exit examination based on 12th grade skills, and terminating the education of those who failed (i.e., throwing millions of students out into the streets as they turn 16).

These measures, taken together, would effectively cripple public control of public education. They would dangerously weaken the power of teacher unions, thus facilitating still further attacks on the public sector. They would leave education policy in the hands of a network of entrepreneurial think tanks, corporate entrepreneurs, and armies of lobbyists whose priorities are profiting from the already huge education market while cutting back on public funding for schools and students.

Indeed, their measures would mean privatization of education, effectively terminating the right to a public education, as we have known it. Many of the most powerful forces in the country want the US, the first country to guarantee public education, to be the first country to end it.

For the last fifty years, public education was one of only two public mandates guaranteed by the government that was accessible to every person, regardless of income. Social Security is the other. Now both systems are threatened with privatization schemes. The government today openly defines its mission as protecting the rights of corporations above everything. Thus public education is a rare public space that is under attack.

The same scenario is being implemented with most of the services that governments used to provide for free or at little cost: electricity, national parks, health care and water. In every case, the methodology is the same: underfund public services, create an uproar and declare a crisis, claim that privatization can do the job better, deregulate or break public control, divert public money to corporations and then raise prices.

In the past year, it's become evident that the corporate surge against public schools is only part of a much broader assault against the public sector, against unions, and indeed against the public's rights and public control of public institutions.

This has been evident for some time now in New Orleans, where Hurricane Katrina's devastation is used as an excuse for permanently privatizing the infrastructure of a major American city: razing public housing and turning land over to developers; replacing the city's public school system with a combination of charter schools and state-run schools; letting the notorious Blackwater private army loose on the civilian population; and, in the end, forcing tens of thousands of families out of the city permanently. The citizens of New Orleans have had their civil rights forcibly expropriated.

Just as the shock of the hurricane was the excuse for the shock therapy applied to New Orleans, so the economic downturn triggered by the subprime mortgage crisis is now the excuse for a national assault on the public sector and the public's rights. . .

In public education, the corporate surge has grown both qualitatively and quantitatively. Where two years ago the corporate education change agents were mainly operating in a relatively small number of large urban areas, they have now surfaced everywhere. The corporatization of public education is the leading edge of privatization. This has the effect of silencing the public voice on every aspect of the situation.

Across the US, public schools are not yet privatized, though private services are increasingly benefiting from this market. However, increasing corporate control of programs – a different mix in every locale – is having a chilling influence on the very things that people (though not corporations) want from teachers: the ability to relate to and teach each child, a nurturing approach that nudges every child to move ahead, human assessments that put people before performance on standardized tests.

Perhaps the single most dramatic development of the corporate approach was the launching of the \$60 million Strong American Schools – Ed in '08 initiative, funded by billionaires Bill Gates and Eli Broad. This is a naked effort to purchase the nation's education policy, no matter who is elected President, by buying their way into every electoral forum.

Ed in '08 has a three-point program: merit pay (basing teachers' compensation on students' scores on high stakes test); national education standards (enforcing conformity and rote learning); and longer school day and school year (still more time for rote learning, less time for kids to be kids. . .)

Where two years ago charter schools were still viewed as experiments affecting a relatively small number of students, in 2007 the corporate privatizers – led by Broad and Gates – grossly expanded their funding to the point where they now loom as a major presence.

In March, the Gates Foundation announced a \$100 million donation to KIPP charter schools, which would enable them to expand their Houston operation to 42 schools (from eight) – effectively, KIPP will be a full-fledged alternative school system in Houston. Also in the past year, Eli Broad and Gates have given in the neighborhood of \$50 million to KIPP and Green Dot charter schools in Los Angeles, with the aim of doubling the percentage of LA students enrolled in charter schools. Oakland, another Broad/Gates targets, now has more than 30 charter schools out of 92. And, as we shall see below, the same trend holds across the country.

NCLB in 2008 is still a major issue. It continues to have a corrosive effect on public schools. It is designed an unfunded mandate, which means that schools must meet ever rigid standards every year, though no more money is appropriated to support this effort. This means that schools must take ever-more money out of the class room to meet federal requirements when schools with low test scores are in “Program Improvement”. Once schools are in PI for 5 years they can be forced into privatization.

NCLB is a driving force that decimates the “publicness” in public schools. In California, more than 2000 schools are now in “Program-Improvement”. This means that they have to meet certain specific, and mostly impossible standards, or they must divert increasingly greater amounts of money out of the classroom and into private programs.

For example, schools in 3rd year PI must take money out of programs that helped schools with a high proportion of low achieving schools and make it available to private tutors. . .

Privatizing public schools inevitably leads to a massive increase in social inequality. Private corporations have never been required to recognize civil rights, because, by definition, these are public rights. If the corporate privatizers succeed in taking over our schools, there will be neither quality education nor civil rights.

The system of public education in the United States is deeply flawed. While suburban schools are among the best in the world, public education in cities has been deliberately underfunded and is in shambles. The solution is not to fight backwards to maintain the old system. Rather it is to fight forward to a new system that will truly guarantee quality education as a civil right for everyone.

Central to this is to challenge the idea that everything in human society should be run by corporations, that only corporations and their political hacks have the right or the power to discuss what public policy should be. . .

The real direction is to increase the role and power of the public in every way, not eliminate it. . .

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