

# Destroying Public Education in America

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Diogenes called education “the foundation of every state.” Education reformer and “father of American education” Horace Mann went even further. He said: “The common school (meaning public ones) is the greatest discovery ever made by man.” He called it the “great equalizer” that was “common” to all, and as Massachusetts Secretary of Education founded the first board of education and teacher training college in the state where the first (1635) public school was established. Throughout the country today, privatization schemes target them and threaten to end a 373 year tradition.

It’s part of Chicago’s Renaissance 2010 Turnaround strategy for 100 new “high-performing” elementary and high schools in the city by that date. Under five year contracts, they’ll “be held accountable....to create innovative learning environments” under one of three “governance structures:”

— charter schools under the 1996 Illinois Charter Schools Law; they’re called “public schools of choice, selected by students and parents....to take responsible risks and create new, innovative and more flexible ways of educating children within the public school system;” in 1997, the Illinois General Assembly approved 60 state charter schools; Chicago was authorized 30, the suburbs 15 more, and 15 others downstate. The city bends the rules by operating about 53 charter “campuses” and lots more are planned.

Charter schools aren’t magnet ones that require students in some cases to have special skills or pass admissions tests. However, they have specific organizing themes and educational philosophies and may target certain learning problems, development needs, or educational possibilities. In all states, they’re legislatively authorized; near-autonomous in their operations; free to choose their students and exclude unwanted ones; and up to now are quasi-public with no religious affiliation. Administration and corporate schemes assure they won’t stay that way because that’s the sinister plan. More on that below.

George Bush praised these schools last April when he declared April 29 through May 5 National Charter Schools Week. He said they provide more “choice,” are a “valuable educational alternative,” and he thanked “educational entrepreneurs for supporting” these schools around the country.

Here’s what the president praised. Lisa Delpit is executive director of the Center for Urban Education & Innovation. In her capacity, she studies charter school performance and cited evidence from a 2005 Department of Education report. Her conclusion: “charter schools....are less likely than public schools to meet state education goals.” Case study examples in five states showed they underperform, and are “less likely than traditional public (ones) to employ teachers meeting state certification standards.”

Other underperformance evidence came from an unexpected source – an October 1994 Money magazine report on 70 public and private schools. It concluded that “students who attend the best public schools outperform most private school students, that the best public schools offer a more challenging curriculum than most private schools, and that the private school advantage in test scores is due to their selective admission policies.”

Clearly a failing grade on what’s spreading across the country en route to total privatization and the triumph of the market over educating the nation’s youths.

In 1991, Minnesota passed the first charter school law. California followed in 1992, and it’s been off to the races since. By 1995 19 states had them, and in 2007 there were over 4000 charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia with more than one million students in them and growing.

Chicago’s two other “governance structures” are:

- contract (privatized) schools run by “independent nonprofit organizations;” they operate under a Performance Agreement between the “organization” and the Board of Education; and

- performance schools under Chicago Public Schools (CPS) management “with freedom and flexibility on many district initiatives and policies;” unmentioned is the Democrat mayor’s close ties to the Bush administration and their preference for marketplace education; the idea isn’t new, but it accelerated rapidly in recent years.

Another part of the scheme is in play as well, in Chicago and throughout the country. Inner city schools are being closed, remaining ones are neglected and decrepit, classroom sizes are increasing, and children and parents are being sacrificed on the alter of marketplace triumphalism.

Consider recent events under Mayor Richard Daley in Chicago. On February 27, the city’s Board of Education unanimously and without discussion voted to close, relocate or otherwise target 19 public schools, fire teachers, and leave students out in the cold. Thousands of parents protested, were ignored and denied access to the Board of Ed meeting where the decision came down pro forma and quick. And it wasn’t the first time. For years under the current mayor, Chicago has closed or privatized more schools than anywhere else in the country, and the trend is accelerating. Since July 2001, the city closed 59 elementary and secondary schools and replaced many of them with charter or contract ones.

### **Nationwide Education “Reform”**

Throughout the country, various type schemes follow the administration’s “education reform” blueprint. It began with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) that became law on January 8, 2002. It succeeded the 1994 Goals 2000: Educate America Act that set eight outcomes-based goals for the year 2000 but failed on all counts to meet them. Goals 2000, in turn, goes back to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and specifically its Title I provisions for funding schools and districts with a high percentage of low-income family students.

NCLB is outrageous. It’s long on testing, school choice, and market-based “reforms” but short on real achievement. It’s built around rote learning, standardized tests, requiring

teachers to “teach to the test,” assessing results by Average Yearly Progress (AYP) scores, and punishing failure harshly – firing teachers and principals, closing schools and transforming them from public to charter or for-profit ones.

Critics denounce the plan as “an endless regimen of test-preparation drills” for poor children. Others call it underfunded and a thinly veiled scheme to privatize education and transfer its costs and responsibilities from the federal government to individuals and impoverished school districts. Mostly, it reflects current era thinking that anything government does business does better, so let it. And Democrats are as complicit as Republicans.

So far, NCLB renewal bills remain stalled in both Houses, election year politics have intervened, and final resolution may be for the 111th Congress to decide. For critics, that’s positive because the law failed to deliver as promised. Its sponsors claimed it would close the achievement gap between inner city and rural schools and more affluent suburban ones. It’s real aim, however, is to commodify education, end government responsibility for it, and make it another business profit center.

Last October, the New York Times cited Los Angeles as a vision of the future. It said “more than 1000 of California’s 9500 schools are branded chronic failures, and the numbers are growing.” Under NCLB, “state officials predict that all 6063” poor district schools will fail and will have to be “restructured” by 2014, when the law requires universal proficiency in math and reading.” It’s happening throughout the country, and The Times cited examples in New York, Florida and Maryland. Schools get five years to deliver or be declared irredeemable, in which case they must “restructure” with new teachers and principals.

In Los Angeles and around the country, “the promised land of universal high achievement seems more distant than ever,” and one parent expressed her frustration. Weeks into the new school year, she said teachers focus solely on what’s likely to appear on exams. “Maybe the system is not designed for people like us,” she complained. Indeed it’s not.

### **New Millennium Education**

That’s the theme of Time magazine’s December 9, 2006 article on the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). It’s on NCEE’s New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce. Time called it “a high-powered, bipartisan assembly of Education Secretaries, business leaders and a former Governor” and the pre-K to 12 education blueprint they released. It’s called “Tough Choices or Tough Times,” was funded by the (Bill) Gates Foundation, and below is its corporate wish list:

- moving beyond charter schools to privatized contract ones; charter schools are just stalking horses for what business really wants – privatizing all public schools for their huge profit potential;
- ending high school for many poor and minority students after the 10th grade – for those who score poorly on standardized tests intended for high school seniors; those who do well can finish high school and go on to college; others who barely pass can go to community colleges or technical schools after high school;
- ending remediation and special education aid for low-performance students to cut costs;

- ending teacher pensions and reducing their health and other benefits;
- ending seniority and introducing merit pay and other teacher differentials based on student performance and questionable standards;
- eliminating school board powers, all regulations, and empowering private companies;
- effectively destroying teacher unions; and
- ending public education and creating a nationwide profit center with every incentive to cut costs and cheat students for bottom line gains; this follows an earlier decades-long corporate - public higher education trend that one educator calls a “subtle yet significant change toward (university) privatization, meaning that private entities are gradually replacing taxpayers as the dominant funding source as state appropriations account for a lower and lower percentage of schools’ operating resources;” corporations now want elementary and secondary education control for the huge new market they represent.

The Skills Commission’s earlier 1990s work advanced the scheme and laid the groundwork for NCLB. It came out of its “America’s Choice: High Skills or Low Wages” report on non-college-bound students. It called them “ill-equipped to meet employer’s current needs and ill-prepared for the rapidly approaching, high-technology, service-oriented future.” It recommended ending an “outmoded model” and adopting a standards-based learning and testing approach to enforce student - teacher accountability.

Both Commission reports reflect a corporate wish list to commodify education, benefit the well-off, and consign underprivileged kids to low-wage, no benefit service jobs. It’s a continuing trend to shift higher-paying ones abroad, downsize the nation, and end the American dream for millions. So why educate them.

## **School Vouchers**

They didn’t make it into NCLB, but they’re very much on the table with a sinister added twist. First some background.

It’s an old idea dating back to the hard right’s favorite economist and man the UK Financial Times called “the last of the great (ones)” when he died in November 2006. Milton Friedman promoted school choice in 1955, then kick-started it in the 1980s under Ronald Reagan. He opposed public education, supported school vouchers for privately-run ones, and believed marketplace competition improves performance even though voucher amounts are inadequate and mostly go to religious schools in violation of the First Amendment discussed below.

Here’s how the Friedman Foundation for Education Choice currently describes the voucher scheme: it’s the way to let “every parent send their child to the school of their choice regardless of where they live or income.” In fact, it’s a thinly veiled plot to end public education and use lesser government funding amounts for well-off parents who can make up the difference and send their children to private-for-profit schools. Others are on their own under various programs with “additional restrictions” the Foundation lists without explanation:

- Universal Voucher Programs for all children;
- Means-Tested Voucher Programs for families below a defined income level;
- Failing Schools, Failing Students Voucher Programs for poor students or “failed” schools;
- Special Needs Voucher Programs for children with special educational needs;
- Pre-kindergarten Voucher Programs; and
- Town Tuitioning Programs for communities without operating public schools for some students’ grade levels.

What else is behind school choice and vouchers? Privatization mostly, but it’s also thinly-veiled aid for parochial schools, mainly Christian fundamentalist ones, and the frightening ideology they embrace – racial hatred, male gender dominance, white Christian supremacy, militarism, free market everything, and ending public education and replacing it with private Christian fundamentalist schools.

In March 1971, the Supreme Court ruled in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* against parochial funding in what became known as the “Lemon Test.” In a unanimous 7 – 0 decision, the Court decided that government assistance for religious schools was unconstitutional because it violates the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause. It prohibits the federal government from declaring and financially supporting a national religion, and the First Amendment states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;....”

That changed in June 2002 when the Court ruled 5 – 4 in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* that Cleveland’s religious school funding didn’t violate the Establishment Clause. The decision used convoluted reasoning that the city’s program was for secular, not religious purposes in spite of some glaring facts. In 1999 and 2000, 82% of funding went to religious schools, and 96% of students benefitting were enrolled in them.

The Court harmed democracy and the Constitution’s letter and spirit. It also contradicted Thomas Jefferson’s 1802 affirmation that there should be “a wall of separation between church and state.” No longer for the nation’s schools.

### **Nationwide Efforts to Privatize Education**

In recent years, privatization efforts have expanded beyond urban inner cities and are surfacing everywhere with large amounts of corporate funding and government support backing them. One effort among many is frightening. It’s called “Strong American Schools – ED in ‘08” and states the following: it’s “a nonpartisan public awareness campaign aimed at elevating education to (the nation’s top priority).” It says “America’s students are losing out,” and the “campaign seeks to unite all Americans around the crucial mission of improving our public schools (by using an election year to elevate) the discussion to a national stage.”

Billionaires Bill Gates and Eli Broad put up \$60 million for the effort for the big returns they expect. Former Colorado governor and (from 2001 – 2006) superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District Roy Romer is the chairman. The Rockefeller (family)

Philanthropy Advisors are also involved as one of their efforts “to bring the entire world under their sway” in the words of one analyst. Other steering committee members include former IBM CEO and current Carlyle Group chairman Lou Gerstner; former Michigan governor and current National Association of Manufacturers president John Engler; and Gates Foundation head Allan Golston.

“Ed in ‘08” has a three-point agenda:

- ending seniority and substituting merit pay for teachers based on student test scores;
- national education standards based on rote learning; standards are to be uniformly based on “what (business thinks) ought to be taught, grade by grade;” it’s to prepare some students for college and the majority for workplace low-skill, low-paid, no-benefit jobs; and
- longer school days and school year; unmentioned but key is eliminating unions or making them weak and ineffective.

In addition, the plan involves putting big money behind transforming public and charter schools to private-for-profit ones. It’s spreading everywhere, and consider California’s “Program Improvement” initiative. Under it, “All schools and local educational agencies (LEAs) (must make) Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)” under NCLB provisions nearly impossible to achieve. Those that fail must divert public money from classrooms to private-for-profit remediating programs. It’s part of a continuing effort to defund inner city schools and place them in private hands, then on to the suburbs with other “innovative” schemes to transform them as well.

Under the governor’s proposed 2008 \$4.8 billion education budget cut, transformation got easier. As of mid-March, 20,000 California teachers got layoff notices with State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell saying this action puts student performance “in grave jeopardy.” Likely by design.

### **Plundering New Orleans**

Nowhere is planned makeover greater than in post-Katrina New Orleans, and last June 28 the Supreme Court made it easier. Its ruling in *Meredith v. Jefferson County (KY)* and *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* effectively gutted the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that affirmed: segregated public schools deny “Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the 14th Amendment.”

In two troubling 5 - 4 decisions, the Roberts Court changed the law. They said public schools can’t seek to achieve or maintain integration through measures taking explicit account of a student’s race. They rewrote history, so cities henceforth may have separate and unequal education. Then it’s on to George Wallace-style racism with policies like: “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” with the High Court believing what was good for 1960s Alabama is now right for the country.

The Court also made it easy for New Orleans to become a corporate predator’s dream, and it didn’t take long to exploit it. Consider public schools alone. The storm destroyed over half their buildings and scattered tens of thousands of students and teachers across the country. Within days of the calamity, Governor Kathleen Blanco held a special legislative session.



Subject - taking over New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS) that serve about 63,000 mostly low-income almost entirely African-American children. Here's what followed:

- two weeks after the hurricane, US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings cited charter schools as “uniquely equipped” to serve Katrina-displaced students;
- two weeks later, she announced the first of two \$20 million grants to the state, solely for these schools;
- then in October 2005, the governor issued an executive order waiving key portions of the state's charter school law allowing public schools to be converted to charter ones with no debate, input or even knowledge of parents and teachers;
- a month later in November, the state legislature voted to take over 107 (84%) of the city's 128 public schools and place them under the state-controlled “Recovery School District (RSD);” and
- in February 2006, all unionized city school employees were fired, then selectively rehired at less pay and fewer or no benefits; it affected 7500 teachers as well as custodians, cafeteria workers and others.

Within six months of Katrina, the city was largely ethnically cleansed, the public schools infrastructure mostly gutted, and a new framework was in place. It put NOPS into three categories - public, charter and the Recovery School District with the latter ones run by the state as charter or for-profit schools.

New Orleans Loyola University law professor Bill Quigley described the plunder and called it “a massive (new) experiment....on thousands of (mostly) African American children....” It's in two halves.

The first half based on Recovery School District's estimated 30,000 returning students in January 2007:

- “Half of (these children were) enrolled (in) charter schools.” They got “tens of millions of dollars” in federal money, but aren't “open to every child....Some charter schools have special selective academic criteria (and can) exclude children in need of special academic help.” Others “have special administrative policies (that) effectively screen out many children.” This latter category has “accredited teachers in manageable size classes (in schools with) enrollment caps....These schools also educate far fewer students with academic or emotional disabilities (and) are in better facilities than the other half of the children....”

### **“The other half:”**

These students were “assigned to a one-year-old experiment in public education run by the State of Louisiana called the ‘Recovery School District (RSD)’ program.” Their education “will be compared” to what first half children get in charter schools. “These children are effectively....called the ‘control group’ of an experiment - those against whom the others will be evaluated.”

RSD “other half” schools got no federal funds. Its leadership is inexperienced. It’s critically understaffed. Many of its teachers are uncertified. There aren’t enough of them, and schools assigned students hadn’t been built for their scheduled fall 2007 opening. In addition, some schools reported a “prison atmosphere,” and in others, children spent long hours in gymnasiums because teachers hadn’t arrived. In addition, there was little academic counseling; college-preparatory math; or science and languages; and class sizes are too large because returning students are assigned to too few of them.

Many RSD schools also have no “working kitchens or water fountains (and their) bathroom facilities are scandalous....Hardly any white children attend this half of the school experiment.” RSD schools are for poor black students getting short-changed and denied a real education by an uncaring state and nation and corporations in it for profit.

Quigley described a system for “Haves (and) Have-Nots,” and race defines it. He also exposed the lie that charter schools are public ones. Across the country, but especially in New Orleans, school officials are unaccountable, can pick and choose their students, and can decide who gets educated and who doesn’t.

### **Separate and Unequal**

In his 2005 book “The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America,” Jonathan Kozol explains a problem getting worse, not better. Using data from state and local education agencies, interviews with researchers and policy makers, and the Harvard Civil Rights Project, his account is disturbing at a time of NCLB and other destructive initiatives.

Harvard Civil Rights researchers captured the problem in their Brown v. Board of Education 50th anniversary assessment stating: “At the beginning of the twenty-first century, American public schools are now 12 years into the process of continuous resegregation.” Desegregation from the 1950s through the late 1980s “has receded to levels not seen in three decades.” The percent of black students in majority-white schools stands at “a level lower than in any year since 1968” with conditions worst of all in the nation’s four most segregated states – New York, Michigan, Illinois and California. “Martin Luther King’s dream is being celebrated in theory and dishonored in practice” by what’s happening in inner-city schools. King would be appalled “that the country would renege on its promises,” and the Supreme Court would authorize it in their two above cited decisions and an earlier 1991 one:

— Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell that ruled for resegregating neighborhood schools mostly in areas of the South where desegregation was most advanced.

According to recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, blacks and Latinos now comprise about 95% of inner-city students in the nation’s 100 largest school systems – accounting for more than one-third of all public school students. Kozol writes about “hypersegregation” with “no more than five or 10 white children (in) a student population of as many as 3000,” and this is the “norm, not the exception, in most northern urban areas today.” It’s “fashionable,” he says, to declare integration “failed” and settle for a new millennium version of “Plessey” and its “separate but equal” doctrine that “Brown” repudiated until now.



Despite high-minded political posturing and programs like NCLB, the truth is these youngsters are forgotten and abused. They're warehoused in decrepit facilities, curricula offerings ignore their needs, testing is unrelated to learning, teachers don't teach, the whole scheme is swept under the rug, and "educating" the unwanted is "standardized" to produce good workers with pretty low skill levels for the kinds of jobs awaiting them. Kozol refers to "school reform" as a "business enterprise with goals, action plans, implementation targets, and productivity measures," and above all what marketplace potential there is.

Separate and unequal is the current inner city school standard. Unless it's exposed, denounced and reversed, (and there's no sign of it), millions of poor and minority children will be denied what the "American dream" increasingly only offers the privileged. And no one in Washington cares or they'd be doing something about it.

### **Disturbing New Dropout Data**

A new Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center report released April 1 is revealing, disturbing but not surprising. It states only 52% of public high school students in the nation's 50 largest cities completed the full curriculum and graduated in 2003 - 2004. This compares to the national average of 70%. Below are some of the findings:

- 1.2 million public high school students drop out each year;
- 17 of the 50 troubled cities have graduation rates of 50% or lower; in Detroit it's 24.9%; Indianapolis is 30.5%; Cleveland at 34.1%; Baltimore - 34.6%; Columbus - 40.9%; Minneapolis - 43.7%; Dallas - 44.4%; New York - 45.2%; Los Angeles - 45.3%; Oakland - 45.6%; Kansas City - 45.7%; Atlanta - 46%; Milwaukee - 46.1%; Denver - 46.3%; Oklahoma City - 47.5%; Miami - 49%; and Philadelphia - 49.6%;
- Chicago barely came in at 51.5%;
- the data show public education in the 50 largest cities' principal school districts in a virtual state of collapse;
- dropout rates for blacks and Latinos are significantly higher than for white students;
- dropouts are eight times more likely to end up in prison; family income is the main problem; in cities most affected, it goes hand in hand with a lack of good jobs and a sub-standard social infrastructure;
- key to understanding the overall problem nationwide is the gutting of social services, widening income gap between rich and poor, exporting manufacturing and other high-paying jobs abroad, and politicians and business exploiting the needs of the many to benefit the few;
- NCLB "reform" is called the solution; Democrats and Republicans are complicit in promoting it, and no one in government explains the truth - the report reveals a sinister scheme to end public education, say it causes poor student performance, and privatize it so the "market" can provide it to well-off communities and merely exploit the rest for profit.

Why else would the (Bill) Gates Foundation have funded the study and Colin Powell's America's Promise Alliance have sponsored it. APA is partnered with business, faith-based (Christian fundamentalist) groups, wealthy funders, and organizations like the American

Bankers Association, right wing Aspen Institute, Business Roundtable, Ford Motor, Fannie Mae, Marriott International, National Association of Manufacturers, US Chamber of Commerce and many other for-profit ones and NGOs.

### **Educational Maintenance Organizations**

It's a new term for an old idea that's much like their failed HMO counterparts. They're private-for-profit businesses that contract with local school districts or individual charter schools to "improve the quality of education without significantly raising current spending levels." They're still rare, but watch out for them and what they're up to.

An example is the Edison Project running Edison (for-profit) Schools. It calls itself "the nation's leading public school partner, working with schools and districts to raise student achievement and help every child reach his or her full potential." In the 2006-2007 school year, Edison served over 285,000 "public school" students in 19 states, the District of Columbia and the UK through "management partnerships with districts and charter schools; summer, after-school, and Supplemental Educational Service programs; and achievement management solutions for school systems."

Edison Schools, and its controversial charter schools and EMO projects, hope to cash in on privatizing education and is bankrolled by Microsoft's co-founder Paul Allen to do it. The company was founded in 1992, its performance record is spotty, and too often deceptive. It cooks the books on its assessments results that unsurprisingly show far more than they achieve. That's clear when independent evaluations are made.

Kalamazoo's Western Michigan University's Evaluation Center published one of them in December 2000. Miami-Dade County public schools did another in the late 1990s. Both studies agreed. They showed Edison School students didn't outperform their public school counterparts, and they were kind in their assessment.

Even more disturbing was Edison's performance in Texas. It took over two Sherman, Texas schools in 1995, then claimed it raised student performance by 5%. But an independent American Institutes for Research (AIR) study couldn't confirm it because Edison threatened legal action if its results were revealed. It was later learned that AIR's findings weren't exactly glowing and were thus suppressed. However, Sherman schools knew them, and when Edison's contract came up for renewal, the company withdrew before being embarrassed by expulsion.

The city's school superintendent had this assessment. He said Edison arrived with promises to educate students at the same cost as public schools and would improve performance. In the end, the city spent an extra \$4 million, and students test scores were lower than in other schools. The superintendent added: "They were more about money than teaching," and that's the problem with privatized education in all its forms - charter, contract or EMOs that place profits over students.

Unless public action stops it, Edison is the future and so is New Orleans in its worst of all forms. It's spreading fast, and without public knowledge or discussion. It's the privatization of all public spaces and belief that marketplace everything works best. Indeed for business, but not people who always lose out to profits.

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