

# Towards the Privatization of Public Education in America. Imposing a Corporate Culture

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*The idea that government can't do anything right has been trumpeted by the right wing for decades, particularly by its recently deceased leader Milton Friedman, a former economist at the University of Chicago. He campaigned to reduce government functions to a minimum while letting private enterprise step in and take full responsibility for running all industries, health care, retirement pensions, and even education, which he viewed as socialist when run by the government. Private enterprise, he argued, employs the most efficient means while always producing superior outcomes.*

## Forms of Privatization in Public Education

These ideas were typically regarded as fringe, but have gradually moved to center stage, embraced by liberals and conservatives alike. George W. Bush succeeded in privatizing many of the operations associated with the functioning of the U.S. military overseas, including the supply of food, the necessary infrastructure for housing soldiers, the use of special security forces such as Blackwater in Iraq, etc. He would have privatized Social Security had he not encountered vehement resistance on the part of the American public.

Obama's contribution to the privatization campaign has centered for the most part on education. But before we can evaluate its impact, it is necessary to consider the different forms privatization can take in relation to schools, since it can occupy different positions on a wide spectrum of possibilities.

At one end of the spectrum lie completely privatized schools that provide their own financing and govern themselves. But many schools are more like hybrids, a mixture of private and public. Charter schools, whose numbers are growing rapidly, are funded with public money (that previously would have gone to public schools) but are privately operated. Often they are run by for-profit or non-profit national companies, as opposed to simply a group of teachers who want to break away from traditional schools and experiment with an alternative curriculum.

Similarly, essentially public universities or K-12 schools might make use of online courses produced by private, for-profit companies, and, of course, private companies produce textbooks.

Another hybrid example is where public universities have aggressively raised tuition fees at public universities so that funding shifts from the public coffers to the students themselves as private citizens. At the University of California at Berkeley students now contribute more for their education than the state does. In the 1960s the state paid for the vast majority of

their expenses.

Still another example is where a publicly funded and operated school imports the corporate culture from the private sector. For example, many public universities are abandoning their former practice of promoting faculty into administrative positions, paying them only slightly more than before and, instead, are drawing on administrators from the private sector and paying them exorbitant salaries while paying part-time faculty less than a living wage. Some presidents of public universities now make over \$1 million a year. Under such circumstances democratic institutions of shared governance are dismantled while power tends to be concentrated at the top, thereby destroying any spirit of collegiality.

Another cultural import from the private sector involves measuring “student learning outcomes” in order to evaluate teachers, as if one is counting gadgets churned out on a factory assembly line. Of course, the result of the evaluation will depend of the choice of measurement, and although highly controversial, standardized tests now represent the most prevalent alternative.

Still another cultural import is the hyper emphasis on competition. Not only are students required to compete against one another for grades, teachers must compete against one another in order to hold their jobs. There is a strong drive to fire teachers whose students have low test scores while retaining and rewarding those with high student test scores with “merit” pay. Thus far teacher unions have been vigorously resisting this practice.

But with Obama’s Race to the Top even schools are forced to compete against one another. By tying federal funding to the acceptance of charter schools, Obama is establishing a framework where traditional public schools must compete with the newer charter schools for students, especially for the students who will raise their school’s test scores.

Finally, partial privatization can occur simply by setting the goal of education as exclusively producing skilled workers primarily for the private sector rather than emphasizing the full development of the student or the training of a critically thinking individual who is prepared to assume the obligations of citizenship in a democratic society. City College of San Francisco, for example, in its fight for accreditation was forced to delete from its mission statement reference to teaching “life skills,” “cultural enrichment,” and “lifelong learning.” Pressure has mounted on all public institutions of higher learning to move students through quickly so that they can graduate with a degree and enter the labor market.

### **Why Privatize?**

There are basically two distinct motives. As mentioned before, many believe that competition, emblematic of the private sector, is the best guarantee for the best outcomes. Competition compels participants to adopt the most efficient means and maximizes motivation by threatening extinction if a company does not excel.

But on a more pragmatic and less ideological level, education offers a tremendous source of profits when private, for-profit companies are allowed to move in. For this reason for-profit educational institutions have mushroomed during the past several decades.

The privatization movement is now in full force as a consequence of the growing inequalities in wealth. With the decimation of those with middle income, wealth has become concentrated at the top. With wealth comes power. Corporate owners have therefore found

it much easier to impose their will and values on the rest of society.

### **What Is At Stake?**

Nothing short of genuine education itself is at stake. What particularly vitiates the learning process is the introduction of a corporate culture or “market” forces that insist on measuring “student learning outcomes” by “objective” standards such as standardized tests; that place an emphasis on competition so that there are inevitably “winners” and “losers;” that regard democratic structures that include teachers with disdain; that narrow the curriculum so that job skills alone are valued; and that think in terms of education as valuable only as a means to material rewards.

Students will not become genuine learners unless they are imbued with a love of learning, meaning they regard learning as an end in itself, an asset not easily measured. Every teacher is fully aware that in competitive environments students will concentrate their efforts on achieving a high grade, not on truly understanding the material. They will memorize for tests and then forget everything. They will take great pains to hide their ignorance, not raise critical questions, let alone questions about material they do not understand. We know that in moments of desperation the vast majority of high school students at one time or another will cheat, which is hardly one of the skills we want them to acquire.

We also know that when teachers are judged by their students’ standardized test scores, they will teach to the test, where the highest goal is to get the “right” answer, with or without understanding the material. Here students are drilled, so that for them school becomes painfully dull and boring. And who knows if those who create the tests have themselves identified the “right” answer or even asked an appropriate question. There is absolutely no opportunity to raise critical questions.

What is particularly vile about judging teachers by their students’ scores is that we have volumes of evidence that prove that the student’s performance in the classroom is far more a function of their family situation than what the teacher does.

Knowledge is best pursued as a cooperative venture where students work together to find solutions to problems and share their information. New teachers do best, for example, when partnered with a mentor who can share with them what they have found that does and does not work. This won’t happen when teachers and schools are competing against one another.

When the search for the Higgs Boson particle, otherwise known as the “god particle,” got underway, two teams of scientists of 3000 each were created, not as a source of motivation through competition but to provide independent confirmation of the other team’s results. Those on each team worked in close cooperation with one another. Although external rewards existed, the participants were driven by their love of physics. As one veteran member told a newcomer: he will have “the time of his life.”

Because of its cooperative nature, the pursuit of knowledge cannot be disentangled from a sense of community where each participant acquires the ability to listen to different points of view, weigh their respective merits, and synthesize the best aspects of each view into a more sophisticated vision. Here everyone must enjoy an equal voice so that no one’s contribution can be routinely dismissed because of an individual’s status.

Consequently, institutions of learning that operate with a corporate top-down structure — where brute power continually preempts the force of the better argument — inevitably undermine the learning process within the classroom. If educators do not practice what they preach, then learning is transformed into a type of obedience and academic achievement becomes a form of deception.

Of course, the most valuable moments in education cannot be measured. When students get carried away with a discussion where each responds to the others and where each contributes to the other's response, it is impossible to quantify the performance of each student, as if each contribution could be isolated from the others. And, of course, any attempt to quantify their performances would only serve to undermine the spiritual pleasure that students derive from collaborating with one another where each one plays an essential role in creating a richer outcome.

## Conclusion

The vast preponderance of evidence unambiguously supports the conclusion that the corporate culture in all its forms is antithetic to education. And this doesn't even take into account the inevitable and prevalent corporate corruption that has infused education in the past several decades where the well-being of students is sacrificed for the pursuit of profits. But those who champion it, including the Obama administration, Bill Gates, and all the reactionary education foundations, display little regard for the conclusions of scientific studies. In their fanatical zeal they have demonstrated a willingness to impose a corporate culture despite the resistance of protesting parents and teachers. Lacking rational justifications, they shamelessly make recourse to force, closing community schools, for example, over the objections of the families they serve.

There can be little wonder that these zealots display no interest in the indispensable role our public schools play in nurturing students into citizens who are prepared to participate in a democratic society. For them, democracy only serves as an annoying hindrance to producing compliant workers who will follow the example of the politicians and uncritically dedicate their lives to serving their corporate masters.

*Note: Diane Ravitch's new book, THE REIGN OF ERROR, provides an excellent analysis of many of the issues raised in this article and is a must-read for anyone serious about education*

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