



Obama's Betrayal of Public Education? Arne Duncan and the Corporate Model of Schooling

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President-elect Barack Obama with his nominee for secretary of education, Arne Duncan. (Photo: Reuters)

Since the 1980s, but particularly under the Bush administration, certain elements of the religious right, corporate culture and Republican right wing have argued that free public education represents either a massive fraud or a contemptuous failure. Far from a genuine call for reform, these attacks largely stem from an attempt to transform schools from a public investment to a private good, answerable not to the demands and values of a democratic society but to the imperatives of the marketplace. As the educational historian David Labaree rightly argues, public schools have been under attack in the last decade "not just because they are deemed ineffective but because they are public." [1] Right-wing efforts to disinvest in public schools as critical sites of teaching and learning and govern them according to corporate interests is obvious in the emphasis on standardized testing, the use of

top-down curricular mandates, the influx of advertising in schools, the use of profit motives to "encourage" student performance, the attack on teacher unions and modes of pedagogy that stress rote learning and memorization. For the Bush administration, testing has become the ultimate accountability measure, belying the complex mechanisms of teaching and learning. The hidden curriculum is that testing be used as a ploy to de-skill teachers by reducing them to mere technicians, that students be similarly reduced to customers in the marketplace rather than as engaged, critical learners and that always underfunded public schools fail so that they can eventually be privatized. But there is an even darker side to the reforms initiated under the Bush administration and now used in a number of school systems throughout the country. As the logic of the market and "the crime complex"[2] frame the field of social relations in schools, students are subjected to three particularly offensive policies, defended by school authorities and politicians under the rubric of school safety. First, students are increasingly subjected to zero-tolerance policies that are used primarily to punish, repress and exclude them. Second, they are increasingly absorbed into a "crime complex" in which security staff, using harsh disciplinary practices, now displace the normative functions teachers once provided both in and outside of the classroom.[3] Third, more and more schools are breaking down the space between education and juvenile delinquency, substituting penal pedagogies for critical learning and replacing a school culture that fosters a discourse of possibility with a culture of fear and social control. Consequently, many youth of color in urban school systems, because of harsh zero-tolerance policies, are not just being suspended or expelled from school. They are being ushered into the dark precincts of juvenile detention centers, adult courts and prison. Surely, the dismantling of this corporatized and militarized model of schooling should be a top priority under the Obama administration. Unfortunately, Obama has appointed as his secretary of education someone who actually embodies this utterly punitive, anti-intellectual, corporatized and test-driven model of schooling.

Barack Obama's selection of Arne Duncan for secretary of education does not bode well either for the political direction of his administration nor for the future of public education. Obama's call for change falls flat with this appointment, not only because Duncan largely defines schools within a market-based and penal model of pedagogy, but also because he does not have the slightest understanding of schools as something other than adjuncts of the corporation at best or the prison at worst. The first casualty in this scenario is a language of social and political responsibility capable of defending those vital institutions that expand the rights, public goods and services central to a meaningful democracy. This is especially true with respect to the issue of public schooling and the ensuing debate over the purpose of education, the role of teachers as critical intellectuals, the politics of the curriculum and the centrality of pedagogy as a moral and political practice.

Duncan, CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, presided over the implementation and expansion of an agenda that militarized and corporatized the third largest school system in the nation, one that is about 90 percent poor and nonwhite. Under Duncan, Chicago took the lead in creating public schools run as military academies, vastly expanded draconian student expulsions, instituted sweeping surveillance practices, advocated a growing police presence in the schools, arbitrarily shut down entire schools and fired entire school staffs. A recent report, "Education on Lockdown," claimed that partly under Duncan's leadership "Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has become infamous for its harsh zero tolerance policies. Although there is no verified positive impact on safety, these policies have resulted in tens of thousands of student suspensions and an exorbitant number of expulsions." [4] Duncan's neoliberal ideology is on full display in the various connections he has established with the ruling political and business elite in Chicago. [5] He led the Renaissance 2010 plan, which was created for Mayor Daley by the Commercial Club of Chicago - an organization representing the largest businesses in the city. The purpose of Renaissance 2010 was to increase the number of high quality schools that would be subject to new standards of accountability - a code word for legitimating more charter schools and high stakes testing in the guise of hard-nosed empiricism. Chicago's 2010 plan targets 15 percent of the city district's alleged underachieving schools in order to dismantle them and open 100 new experimental schools in areas slated for gentrification. Most of the new experimental schools have eliminated the teacher union. The Commercial Club hired corporate consulting firm A.T. Kearney to write Ren2010, which called for the closing of 100 public schools and the reopening of privatized charter schools, contract schools (more charters to circumvent state limits) and "performance" schools. Kearney's web site is unapologetic about its business-oriented notion of leadership, one that John Dewey thought should be avoided at all costs. It states, "Drawing on our program-management skills and our knowledge of best practices used across industries, we provided a private-sector perspective on how to address many of the complex issues that challenge other large urban education transformations." [6]

Duncan's advocacy of the Renaissance 2010 plan alone should have immediately disqualified him for the Obama appointment. At the heart of this plan is a privatization scheme for creating a "market" in public education by urging public schools to compete against each other for scarce resources and by introducing "choice" initiatives so that parents and students will think of themselves as private consumers of educational services. [7] As a result of his support of the plan, Duncan came under attack by community organizations, parents, education scholars and students. These diverse critics have denounced it as a scheme less designed to improve the quality of schooling than as a plan for privatization, union busting and

the dismantling of democratically-elected local school councils. They also describe it as part of neighborhood gentrification schemes involving the privatization of public housing projects through mixed finance developments.[8] (Tony Rezko, an Obama and Blagojevich campaign supporter, made a fortune from these developments along with many corporate investors.) Some of the dimensions of public school privatization involve Renaissance schools being run by subcontracted for-profit companies - a shift in school governance from teachers and elected community councils to appointed administrators coming disproportionately from the ranks of business. It also establishes corporate control over the selection and model of new schools, giving the business elite and their foundations increasing influence over educational policy. No wonder that Duncan had the support of David Brooks, the conservative op-ed writer for The New York Times.

One particularly egregious example of Duncan's vision of education can be seen in the conference he organized with the Renaissance Schools Fund. In May 2008, the Renaissance Schools Fund, the financial wing of the Renaissance 2010 plan operating under the auspices of the Commercial Club, held a symposium, "Free to Choose, Free to Succeed: The New Market in Public Education," at the exclusive private club atop the Aon Center. The event was held largely by and for the business sector, school privatization advocates, and others already involved in Renaissance 2010, such as corporate foundations and conservative think tanks. Significantly, no education scholars were invited to participate in the proceedings, although it was heavily attended by fellows from the pro-privatization Fordham Foundation and featured speakers from various school choice organizations and the leadership of corporations. Speakers clearly assumed the audience shared their views.

Without irony, Arne Duncan characterized the goal of Renaissance 2010 creating the new market in public education as a "movement for social justice." He invoked corporate investment terms to describe reforms explaining that the 100 new schools would leverage influence on the other 500 schools in Chicago. Redefining schools as stock investments he said, "I am not a manager of 600 schools. I'm a portfolio manager of 600 schools and I'm trying to improve the portfolio." He claimed that education can end poverty. He explained that having a sense of altruism is important, but that creating good workers is a prime goal of educational reform and that the business sector has to embrace public education. "We're trying to blur the lines between the public and the private," he said. He argued that a primary goal of educational reform is to get the private sector to play a huge role in school change in terms of both money and intellectual capital. He also attacked the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), positioning it as an obstacle to business-led reform. He also insisted that the CTU opposes charter schools (and, hence, change itself), despite the fact that the CTU runs ten such schools under Renaissance 2010. Despite the

representation in the popular press of Duncan as conciliatory to the unions, his statements and those of others at the symposium belied a deep hostility to teachers unions and a desire to end them (all of the charters created under Renaissance 2010 are deunionized). Thus, in Duncan's attempts to close and transform low-performing schools, he not only reinvents them as entrepreneurial schools, but, in many cases, frees "them from union contracts and some state regulations." [9] Duncan effusively praised one speaker, Michael Milkie, the founder of the Nobel Street charter schools, who openly called for the closing and reopening of every school in the district precisely to get rid of the unions. What became clear is that Duncan views Renaissance 2010 as a national blueprint for educational reform, but what is at stake in this vision is the end of schooling as a public good and a return to the discredited and tired neoliberal model of reform that conservatives love to embrace.

In spite of the corporate rhetoric of accountability, efficiency and excellence, there is to date no evidence that the radical reforms under Duncan's tenure as the "CEO" of Chicago Public Schools have created any significant improvement. In part, this is because the Chicago Public Schools and the Renaissance Schools Fund report data in obscurantist ways to make traditional comparisons difficult if not impossible. [10] And, in part, examples of educational claims to school improvement are being made about schools embedded in communities that suffered dislocation and removal through coordinated housing privatization and gentrification policies. For example, the city has decimated public housing in coveted real estate enclaves, dispossessing thousands of residents of their communities. Once the poor are removed, the urban cleansing provides an opportunity for Duncan to open a number of Renaissance Schools, catering to those socio-economically empowered families whose children would surely improve the city's overall test scores. What are alleged to be school improvements under Renaissance 2010, rest on an increase in the city's overall test scores and other performance measures that parodies the financial shell game corporations used to inflate profit margins - and prospects for future catastrophes are as inevitable. In the end, all Duncan leaves us with is a Renaissance 2010 model of education that is celebrated as a business designed "to save kids" from a failed public system. In fact, it condemns public schooling, administrators, teachers and students to a now outmoded and discredited economic model of reform that can only imagine education as a business, teachers as entrepreneurs and students as customers. [11]

It is difficult to understand how Barack Obama can reconcile his vision of change with Duncan's history of supporting a corporate vision for school reform and a penchant for extreme zero-tolerance policies - both of which are much closer to the retrograde policies hatched in conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institution, Fordham Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, than to the values of the many millions who voted for the democratic change he

promised. As is well known, these think tanks share an agenda not for strengthening public schooling, but for dismantling it and replacing it with a private market in consumable educational services. At the heart of Duncan's vision of school reform is a corporatized model of education that cancels out the democratic impulses and practices of civil society by either devaluing or absorbing them within the logic of the market or the prison. No longer a space for relating schools to the obligations of public life, social responsibility to the demands of critical and engaged citizenship, schools in this dystopian vision legitimate an all-encompassing horizon for producing market identities, values and those privatizing and penal pedagogies that both inflate the importance of individualized competition and punish those who do not fit into its logic of pedagogical Darwinism.[12]

In spite of what Duncan argues, the greatest threat to our children does not come from lowered standards, the absence of privatized choice schemes or the lack of rigid testing measures that offer the aura of accountability. On the contrary, it comes from a society that refuses to view children as a social investment, consigns 13 million children to live in poverty, reduces critical learning to massive testing programs, promotes policies that eliminate most crucial health and public services and defines rugged individualism through the degrading celebration of a gun culture, extreme sports and the spectacles of violence that permeate corporate controlled media industries. Students are not at risk because of the absence of market incentives in the schools. Young people are under siege in American schools because, in the absence of funding, equal opportunity and real accountability, far too many of them have increasingly become institutional breeding grounds for racism, right-wing paramilitary cultures, social intolerance and sexism.[13] We live in a society in which a culture of testing, punishment and intolerance has replaced a culture of social responsibility and compassion. Within such a climate of harsh discipline and disdain for critical teaching and learning, it is easier to subject young people to a culture of faux accountability or put them in jail rather than to provide the education, services and care they need to face problems of a complex and demanding society.[14] What Duncan and other neoliberal economic advocates refuse to address is what it would mean for a viable educational policy to provide reasonable support services for all students and viable alternatives for the troubled ones. The notion that children should be viewed as a crucial social resource - one that represents, for any healthy society, important ethical and political considerations about the quality of public life, the allocation of social provisions and the role of the state as a guardian of public interests - appears to be lost in a society that refuses to invest in its youth as part of a broader commitment to a fully realized democracy. As the social order becomes more privatized and militarized, we increasingly face the problem of losing a generation of young people to a system of increasing intolerance, repression and

moral indifference. It is difficult to understand why Obama would appoint as secretary of education someone who believes in a market-driven model that has not only failed young people, but given the current financial crisis has been thoroughly discredited. Unless Duncan is willing to reinvent himself, the national agenda he will develop for education embodies and exacerbates these problems and, as such, it will leave a lot more kids behind than it helps.

[1] Cited in Alfie Kohn, "The Real Threat to American Schools," *Tikkun* (March-April 2001), p. 25. For an interesting commentary on Obama and his possible pick to head the education department and the struggle over school reform, see Alfie Kohn, "Beware School 'Reformers'," *The Nation* (December 29, 2008). Online: www.thenation.com/doc/20081229/kohn/print.

[2] This term comes from: David Garland, "The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[3] For a brilliant analysis of the "governing through crime" complex, see Jonathan Simon, "Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear," (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[4] Advancement Project in partnership with Padres and Jovenes Unidos, Southwest Youth Collaborative, "Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track," (New York: Children & Family Justice Center of Northwestern University School of Law, March 24, 2005), p.31. On the broader issue of the effect of racialized zero tolerance policies on public education, see Christopher G. Robbins, "Expelling Hope: The Assault on Youth and the Militarization of Schooling" (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008). See also, Henry A. Giroux, "The Abandoned Generation" (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

[5] David Hursh and Pauline Lipman, "Chapter 8: Renaissance 2010: The Reassertion of Ruling-Class Power through Neoliberal Policies in Chicago" in David Hursh, "High-Stakes Testing and the Decline of Teaching and Learning" (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

[6] See: www.atkearney.com

[7] "Creating a New Market of Public Education: The Renaissance Schools Fund 2008 Progress Report," The Renaissance Schools Fund www.rsfcicago.org

[8] Kenneth J. Saltman, "Chapter 3: Renaissance 2010 and No Child Left Behind Capitalizing on Disaster: Taking and Breaking Public Schools" (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007).

[9] Sarah Karp and Joyn Myers, "Duncan's Track Record," Catalyst Chicago (December 15, 2008). Online: www.catalyst-chicago.org/news/index.php?item=2514&cat=5&tr=y&auid=4336549

[10] (See Chicago Public Schools Office of New Schools 2006/2007 Charter School Performance Report Executive Summary)

[11] See Dorothy Shipps, "School Reform, Corporate Style: Chicago 1880-2000," (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006).

[12] See, for example, Summary Report, "America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline," Children's Defense Fund. Online at: www.childrensdefense.org/site/DocServer/ CPP_report_2007_summary.pdf?docID=6001; also see, Elora Mukherjee, "Criminalizing the Classroom: The Over-Policing of New York City Schools," (New York: American Civil Liberties Union and New York Civil Liberties, March 2008), pp. 1-36.

[13] Donna Gaines, "How Schools Teach Our Kids to Hate," *Newsday* (Sunday, April 25, 1999), p. B5.

[14] As has been widely reported, the prison industry has become big business with many states spending more on prison construction than on university construction. Jennifer Warren, "One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008," (Washington, DC: The PEW Center on the States, 2007). Online at: www.pewcenteronthestates.org/news_room_detail.aspx?id=35912

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