

An Age of Hypocrisy

By [Diane Ravitch](#) on March 22, 2011 9:53 AM | [11 Comments](#) | [3 Recommendations](#)

Dear Deborah,

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In an earlier post, I questioned whether we live in an [age of national insanity](#). I did so because it seems insane to think that we can improve our nation's schools by attacking teachers and the education profession and by turning public funds over to the private sector. After I reflected a bit more, I began to wonder if we actually live in an age of national stupidity, because our policymakers are pursuing policies that have no evidence to support them; this is what they think of as "innovation." When a policy fails again and again (like merit pay) and you push it through anyway, that's not "innovation," it's willful ignorance and stupidity.

In the wake of the events of the past few weeks, I have concluded that we also live in an age of hypocrisy. We see governors and legislatures claiming the mantle of "reform" as they slash school funding, increase class size, attack teachers' benefits, and hack away at the programs and services available to children. In Detroit, the Broad-trained emergency financial manager, Robert Bobb, plans to close half the public schools and increase class sizes to 60, to address the deficit. He seems eager to convert as many public schools as possible into charter schools. Michael Winerip of *The New York Times* visited Detroit and [reported that the charter schools in that city get no better results](#) than the regular public schools. Corporate reformers are convinced that charter schools will somehow be cheaper, but I have observed that over time, charter operators complain loudly that they are not getting the same funding as the regular public schools. So, over time, they get no better results and bring about no savings. What will we gain by eviscerating the public sector?

In [Florida, the "reform" legislation](#) eliminates teacher tenure and bases 50 percent of teachers' evaluations on standardized test scores. The legislation also calls for merit pay for test-score gains and requires districts to develop tests in every subject that is taught, including art, band, choir, physical education, and on and on. Critics warned that the legislation was a multi-billion-dollar unfunded mandate, because the legislature is not providing funding for merit pay or for test development. I don't know whether this legislation is stupid or insane; I expect it is both. It certainly will not improve the quality of teaching and learning in Florida. I note that Michelle Rhee advised Gov. Rick Scott on his "reform" agenda. Shame on her.

In [South Carolina](#), the legislature plans to cut \$12 million from funding for physical education and guidance counselors, but managed to find \$25 million to fund new charter schools. So, all the children in the state will be less fit so a handful of children can attend privately managed charters. Makes sense, no? Oh, yes, the legislature also found \$10 million to pay for a golf tournament. I guess the money isn't all gone, but priorities have changed.

In Wisconsin, [Gov. Scott Walker pushed through his legislation](#) to curtail collective-bargaining rights for public-sector unions, as part of his "education reform" agenda. The same legislation permits the governor to sell public utilities without competitive bidding. Being a true corporate reformer, Gov. Walker wants to lift the income cap on vouchers, so that everyone can attend non-public schools at public expense. He wants more charter schools. And he wants to cut the budget for public education by \$900 million.

While right-wing governors impose cuts on the public schools and lay off thousands of teachers, the corporate reformers are strangely silent, perhaps because the dramatic reductions in education budgets are accompanied by cuts to corporate/business taxes. When states and cities face deficits, as they do, why is it okay to impose sacrifices on public schools, but not impose taxes on the richest members of our society? [Forbes recently posted a list of the richest people](#) in the world and noted that there are now more than 400 Americans who are billionaires. Bully for them, but why shouldn't they pay more in taxes? They can certainly afford it. Will Mark Zuckerberg move to a tax haven if he is asked to pay more in taxes? I don't think so.

The governor of [Michigan, Rick Snyder, is lowering taxes on businesses](#) while increasing taxes on poor and working-class people. Snyder plans to cut business taxes by 86 percent, which will cost the state nearly \$2 billion in revenues. He will make up the difference by raising personal income taxes and hiking the rates on the lowest earners (but not the richest!). If a town or school district faces a deficit because of the state's reckless tax cuts for business, then the governor will have the power to remove the elected government and replace it with an emergency financial manager, empowered to break any and all contracts and rule by decree. As [E.D. Kain wrote](#) in *Forbes* online, why are there no protests from the Tea Party or Fox News about these big-government policies in Lansing that suspend democracy? There is a word for this kind of anti-democratic collaboration between business and government, but we haven't used it much since the 1940s: fascism.

Where are our nation's priorities? If you missed it, I hope you will read Paul Krugman's excellent column on ["The Forgotten Millions"](#) in *The New York Times*.

Some of the corporate reformers say that school budgets must be cut because "the money is all gone," or "we are broke." [E.J. Dionne answered that claim](#) in *The Washington Post*. Certainly, if we refuse to tax the people who have the most money, then we are broke.

It is simply astonishing that the richest nation in the world can't or won't provide a good education to all its children.

An age of insanity? No, these are rational people. An age of stupidity? No, these are people who could probably do quite well on an IQ test. An age of hypocrisy? Yes. An age of meanness? Yes. What do you think?

Diane

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