

Privatization: A Drain on Public Schools

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Public education represents a public good. Then why is so much public funding being diverted to charter schools and vouchers?

It's possible, of course, that the whole thing is sheer coincidence. If so, governors and state legislatures accomplished something truly remarkable in 2011. Faced with the greatest state budget shortfalls in history, they arranged for the greatest transfer of public assets to private schools ever contemplated. It may be coincidental, but only in the sense that novelist Emma Bull (1991) defined *coincidence* as "the word we use when we can't see the levers and the pulleys" (p. 22).

The sheer scale of the 2011 effort to privatize public education through vouchers and charters is staggering. "School may be out for the summer," gloated an editorial from the *Wall Street Journal* ("The Year of School Choice," 2011) in July, "but school choice is in... This year is shaping up as the best for reformers in a very long time." No fewer than 13 states enacted or expanded charter or voucher legislation in 2011, while 28 states had legislation pending in midsummer.

Meanwhile, states were grappling with the largest budget shortfalls on record, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (McNichol, Oliff, & Johnson, 2011). Massive budget holes—totaling \$110 billion in 2009, \$191 billion in 2010, and \$130 billion in 2011—had to be filled, patched, and spackled. According to a report from the Center on Education Policy (2011), the end of federal stimulus funds and shrinking state and local revenues combined with high unemployment and the collapse of the housing market meant that perhaps 84 percent of all public school districts expected to cut essential services in 2011–12, paring back classes, eliminating language offerings, laying off teachers, and slashing summer school and extended-day programs.

A Growing Contagion

Did governors and state legislators respond to the crisis by rushing to shore up public schools? Many did not. Tax credits, vouchers, and charters were all the rage in many states. Louisiana strengthened its state income tax break for private school tuition. North Carolina permitted parents of students with disabilities to claim a tax credit for expenses related to private school tuition, and there was talk in the state of a system of public schools designed around vouchers. Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin lifted the cap limiting the number of students in Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program, the original voucher effort in the United States.

The story is the same practically everywhere. Governors and legislators in Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Utah wrote legislation to take money out of public schools (many serving low-income families) to pay for tuition at charter or private schools (many serving upper-middle-income and wealthy families).

Even national figures got in on the act. While voting to cut \$11 billion out of federal education funding for fiscal year 2011 (including cuts in Title I, the Striving Readers program, literacy, teacher quality, math and science, and education technology, as well as special and vocational and adult education), the U.S. House of Representatives found the money to maintain charter and choice funding (Full-Year Continuing

Appropriations Act, 2011). It then voted to reenact the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program, a voucher program that the Obama administration had earlier tried to kill (Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Act, 2011).

At about the same time, the U.S. Supreme Court overruled long-standing court precedents opposing aid to religious schools. In a 5–4 vote, the court ruled in favor of an Arizona school voucher program that critics argued improperly directed taxpayer funds to religious schools (Liptak, 2011). Nine years earlier, in another 5–4 vote, *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, the Supreme Court ruled that Cleveland's state-enacted school voucher program did not violate the U.S. Constitution.

Levers and Pulleys in Plain Sight

When advocates of charters and vouchers emphasize their commitment to the needs of low-income children, do not be beguiled. The altars before which many of them genuflect are those erected by the business school—deregulation, markets, and contempt for public service. Those are the levers and pulleys behind the year's events.

What we have witnessed in 2011 is the culmination of a 30-year assault on public service in general and public education in particular. Grounded in arguments in favor of free markets and letting citizens decide how to spend their own money, this rhetoric has demonized the poor with fictions about welfare queens, abased itself before Wall Street, and made a mockery of the need for public oversight and regulation, even in such basic areas as food safety. "Government," said Ronald Reagan in his 1981 inaugural address, "is not the solution to our problem; government *is* the problem."

This assault is a throwback to a 17th-century notion of the supremacy of private property. "Every man has a property in his own person," said philosopher John Locke (1690/1980). "This nobody has a right to, but himself." Even political scientist Adam Smith, the poster boy for the magic of the free market's "invisible hand," never went that far. Smith (1776/1910) understood, as he wrote in the midst of the American Revolution, that "civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is, in reality, instituted for the defense of the rich against the poor, or of those who have property against those who have none at all."

As part of the reverence for property, the Reagan Revolution produced an orgy of tax cuts over three decades that produced unsustainable deficit financing at the federal level and hamstrung state governments in California, Washington, and elsewhere, with citizens' initiatives that required the approval of two-thirds of voters to raise taxes but only one-third of them to veto revenue enhancements. Government finance in too many places today suffers not from de Tocqueville's "tyranny of the majority" (1835/1960) but from a tyranny of the minority.

This tyranny has taken public funds intended for the common good and redirected them toward the benefit of the middle class and the wealthy. And it has done so at the precise moment that states were staring into the abyss of bankruptcy, forced to gut funds for parks, libraries, food for the elderly, medical care for low-income children, and, of course, schools.

So we find New Jersey Governor Chris Christie announcing a pilot program last June to allow private companies to run public schools in areas in which "failing schools deny children hope and opportunity" ("Governor Chris Christie Announces," 2011). The proposal arrived on the heels of a ruling by the state's highest court holding that the governor's education cuts of \$1 billion unconstitutionally denied children hope and opportunity by shortchanging the state's most disadvantaged students. Christie's acting education commissioner at the time, Christopher Cerf, was the former president of Edison Schools, the largest for-profit manager of public schools in the United States.

Public Schools as Public Good

What is lost in this assault is any concept of the public school as a public good. These are the schools that have bound the nation together. Education, said Horace Mann (1848), the inventor of the American common school, "is our only political safety. Outside of this ark all is deluge." Education, he declared, "is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery."

John Dewey, the other great American educational philosopher, thought of schools as essential to civil society—not because they provided a set of practical skills but because they helped individuals realize their potential. "Education," Dewey is commonly quoted as saying, "is not preparation for life; education is life itself." Like Mann and Jefferson, Dewey understood literacy and numeracy to be essential to the American democratic experiment.

Even Milton Friedman (Friedman & Friedman, 1979), the economist who swore off Keynesian economics in favor of markets (and first suggested vouchers as a means of financing schools), understood the public good that public education represented:

We have always been proud, and with good reason, of the widespread availability of schooling to all and the role that public schooling has played in fostering the assimilation of newcomers into our society, preventing fragmentation and divisiveness, and enabling people from different cultural and religious backgrounds to live together in harmony. (pp. 150–151)

The authors of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) expressed the importance of public schools in this way:

Our concern, however, goes well beyond matters such as industry or commerce. It also includes the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people, which knit together the very fabric of society... A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom. (p. 2)

In the rush to privatize public education, we risk losing the sense that public schools are the people's schools. They are a public, not a private, good. All Americans, young and old alike, benefit greatly from them.

A Well-Known Argument

The arguments in opposition to the use of public funds for private education are so well known that they hardly need repeating. Privatizing public schools strikes at the core of the American democratic experiment, in which schools are expected to serve as the Great Melting Pot's great melting pot. Encouraging the most highly motivated students and families to enroll in private institutions leaves public schools with a larger proportion of students who are troubled, challenged, and not as well motivated. Providing vouchers to help public school students attend religious schools breaches the First Amendment's wall between church and state. Politicians have brushed all of these objections aside.

The Verdict on Charters

Political leaders might find some justification for their actions if they could point to compelling evidence that vouchers or charters provide superior results. With more than 4,600 charter schools enrolling more than 1.4 million students in the United States, charters have become a significant force in education reform (Lake, 2010). They are a darling of the Left, the Right, the Obama administration's Department of Education, and major education foundations.

On their merits, it's hard to understand the attraction. The research on the effectiveness of vouchers and charters is disappointing, ambiguous, and unpersuasive at best. The impetus behind privatization is based on ideology, not evidence.

Most research on charters and vouchers is itself highly politicized, with advocates on both sides of the question cherry-picking studies to support their positions—and frequently financing research themselves. But as I will show, the most disinterested research is fairly clear: Charters are no better (and frequently worse) than comparable public schools, and vouchers seem to have had little effect on student achievement.

In 2009, a pro-charter institute that had earlier reported encouraging findings on student achievement in charter schools (Raymond, 2003) completed a meta-analysis that integrated longitudinal databases on student achievement in 15 states and the District of Columbia. This institute, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, used the databases to explore student outcomes in charter and traditional public schools (2009b). Because the databases incorporated achievement data tied to individual students over time, the analysis could employ a value-added approach that examined student growth by comparing charter students with "virtual twins" in public schools.

The 16 jurisdictions involved in the study educate more than 50 percent of all students in the United States and contain more than 70 percent of the nation's charter school students. The results were sobering: CREDO reported that, on the basis of student achievement, it was hard to distinguish nearly 50 percent of charter schools from traditional public schools. Only 17 percent of charters produced gains that were significantly better than traditional public schools, whereas 37 percent "had results that were significantly negative." That is to say, in comparison with traditional public schools, charters failed twice as often as they succeeded.

The data and the report carefully reflect many of the nuances that a national examination of charter schools should respect. The authors document a wide variation in charter school performance by state. They offer evidence that state policy can influence charter school quality, often in nonintuitive ways. For example, offering charter operators a choice among authorizers (typically favored by charter advocates) seems to produce a negative effect on student academic growth, possibly because applicants seek the most lenient authorizers.

The authors report somewhat more encouraging findings for charter elementary and middle schools than for charter high schools. And although they indicate that low-income students and English language learners seem to be well served in charter schools, black and Hispanic students demonstrate significantly worse outcomes than their public school "twins."

The CREDO researchers handily dismissed criticisms of their methodology (2009a). The results stand as the benchmark national study on charter school outcomes.

The Evidence on Vouchers

What about vouchers? The conventional wisdom is that students with vouchers—especially in inner cities—surely do better in their new placements than students in traditional public schools. If that's so, the evidence has yet to appear. Here again we find dueling studies from advocates on both sides. But reams of credible evidence undermine the case for vouchers:

- Through 2009, U.S. Department of Education evaluations of the Washington, D.C., voucher program demonstrated no improvements in academic achievement for targeted students (National Coalition for Public Education, n.d.). The evaluations showed little effect on student safety, satisfaction, or motivation. Meanwhile, most

voucher students attended faith-based schools where they had significantly reduced access to such essential services as English as a second language programs, services for students with special needs, tutoring and counseling, and even nurses and cafeterias.

- The Cleveland voucher program approved by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2002 is also unable to demonstrate sterling results. A 2011 account indicated that Cleveland public school students often outperformed voucher students on state proficiency tests (Ott, 2011).
- The 2011 evaluation results in Milwaukee provide little comfort to voucher advocates. Students with vouchers in private schools performed worse in reading and math than did students in Milwaukee's public schools. When analysis is restricted solely to low-income students, the proportions of voucher and public school students who reached proficiency were about the same (Richards & Hetzner, 2011). These state results provided the first apples-to-apples achievement comparison between public and individual voucher schools. The results "cast a shadow" on the overall quality of the 21-year-old Milwaukee program, said Richards and Hetzner, writing in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

"Voucher schools are no silver bullet," concluded Diane Ravitch (2011), author of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* in her *Education Week* blog last April. "They should not be embarrassed. But our policymakers in Washington and in the statehouses should be."

Quick Fix or Systems Approach?

As part of Mao Zedong's plan to industrialize China during the Great Leap Forward, he called for what came to be known as the Great Sparrow Campaign, requiring that sparrows be destroyed because they consumed harvested grain. The unanticipated consequence was a plague of insects that destroyed grain on the stalk, contributing mightily to a famine in which perhaps 40 million Chinese perished.

The catastrophe visited on the Chinese people by these misbegotten policies is a perfect, if egregious, example of the potential effects of "fixes that fail," which leadership guru Peter Senge described in *The Fifth Discipline* (1990). In a reflexive, almost addictive fashion, leaders turn to quick fixes that address the presenting problem (birds consuming grain), while ignoring the larger systems in which the presenting problem is located (nature's delicate balance).

Senge's argument is that leaders need to move away from quick fixes, easy solutions, and silver bullets. Leaders need to understand interrelationships, deeper patterns, and the systems behind the events. They need, in short, to become systems thinkers.

Bigger and Bolder Is Better

The nation's education difficulties call for such a systemic and nuanced approach. One of the perverse outcomes of the current education debate is the exclusion of educators from the school reform discussion at the policy level. Educators have become strangers in their own land, marginalized and silenced through a process that Opatow (1990) describes as derogation; blame; belittlement; the assumption of superior insights (by people who have never spent a day in a classroom as adults); and the adoption of technical solutions to complex human challenges.

This silencing is as true of the discussion around No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top as it is of the charter and voucher discussion. Nowhere is this more evident than in the conscious policy decision in both major political parties to ignore overwhelming evidence of the powerful effects of poverty on achievement, a

stance that leaves the larger community completely off the hook for the United States' education shortcomings.

Now is the time for policymakers and educators to unite around a bigger and bolder agenda that respects the civic role of the school, recognizes the effects of poverty on achievement, and encourages the development and integration of comprehensive and coordinated services for children throughout the school.

For their part, educators need to recognize the new demands of the times, expand their vision of what is possible, enlarge their skill set to work with professionals from other fields, and begin to think of new ways to provide new options to a public that insists on choices in telephone and cable providers—and sees no reason not to expect multiple options from schools as well.

To their credit, public schools have always provided various ways to graduate—college prep, vocational, and general education. They have offered magnet schools and alternative programs. These options should be touted as authentic responses to the needs of a diverse student body.

But beyond optional ways to graduate, school systems everywhere might explore optional ways to encourage learning. Very large urban systems might want to consider hiring alternative school providers, as long as they are nonprofit. There's also no reason to leave online learning, tutoring, and extended-day programs to the private sector. Who better to develop and provide these services than professionally trained educators? The point is to provide students, parents, and communities with what they need—not just what the traditional system has been comfortable providing.

Both politicians and educators need to rid themselves of what Senge refers to as "learning disabilities." Educators do themselves and the students whom they serve little good if defense of the status quo becomes the default position in the face of ideological attacks. Public officials do not serve the country well by offering ill-considered proposals based on ideology or assuming that business practices can be parachuted wholesale into local schools.

Unless we can reach this happy state of affairs, vouchers and charters may soon be enshrined, alongside Mao's Great Sparrow Campaign, in the Hall of Fame of Fixes That Failed—with catastrophic results for both American democracy and American life.

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