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The Education Reform Fig Leaf Is Finally Stripped Away

by [Jim Horn](#)

I worked as a Tennessee teacher for almost 20 year before coming to higher education, where I have taught for the past dozen years or so. Never would I have imagined when I left Tennessee schools in 1996 that 15 years later I would be watching **a full frontal attack** waged to eliminate or neutralize collective bargaining, job security, due process, and the last shreds of academic freedom of Tennessee teachers. But then, it's not just in Tennessee or just teachers, for this war is being waged on workers in the public or private sectors in Florida, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, New Jersey, and elsewhere. This crusade is inspired, funded, and directed by a handful of billionaires who are guided neither by political allegiance nor moral compass. These oligarchs, rather, see workers' rights to organize and collectively bargain as the final stumbling block to the creation of a corporate state that is unimpeded in its aspirations for social control and unrestrained greed and, thus, unchecked by either labor laws or considerations or workers' rights.

Pitted now against this billionaires' campaign on teachers in Tennessee is the **tepid and weak-kneed Tennessee Education Association**. This is the same TEA that I remember from my time as a Tennessee teacher, the professional organization that we joined for the liability insurance coverage, not any anything significant they did for teaching. As easy as TEA was to roll in those days, the big difference now is that TEA is even friendlier to "education reform" than it was in the 80s and 90s. Back then, at least there was some modest and low-key protestation when Governor Lamar Alexander installed the Career Ladder Program, which left teacher salaries so low that I and many of my Career Level III colleagues back then worked part-time in the evenings so that we could afford to buy a house or take our families on a vacation.

Today the TEA is a weaker version of the reform-friendly national organization, NEA, which has been regularly bad-mouthed by the Bush and the Obama Administrations any time they raise a finger against the never-ending reforms that move our schools closer and closer to privatization and to what Diane Ravitch calls more "test and punish" school programs that benefit corporations much more than they do children. Much to the chagrin of those of us who believe that 25 years of more and more testing should be enough to show that it doesn't work to make schools or children better, both the NEA and AFT have decided that compromise with the "reform agenda" is the only way to maintain a seat at the feast where billions are served by the Feds and by the corporate foundations to those who are polite and wait their turn. Just one quick example: this past summer Bill Gates became keynote speaker at the AFT Convention after passing across the table an "innovation fund" grant worth several hundred thousand dollars that helped AFT, in fact, stage their convention. But I digress.

In terms of support from teacher organizations for the corporate education agenda, it was the vocal support by the TEA that pushed Tennessee's Race to the Top application over the top, so to speak, so that Tennessee ended up with \$500 million in federal money, even as other states couldn't convince their teachers that charter schools, more testing, and test score based evaluation is good for public education. The TEA has actually embraced the reformer-friendly teacher evaluation scheme that the corporate reformers demanded, despite warnings (**Letter Report**) by the National Research Council and other top researchers regarding the dangers of using students' value-added test scores to make high stakes decisions about teachers or children. The TEA, in fact, has yielded to every major demand that is on the corporate education agenda, including lifting the cap on charter school expansion and relaxing standards for replacing faculty and staff in schools listed for federal turnaround efforts.

Even so, there **doesn't seem to anything that can satisfy the demands of the extremists** now in charge of corporate education reform in many states, including Tennessee and Wisconsin. Appeasement clearly has not worked, and the war that is now being waged in Wisconsin and elsewhere on teachers and other workers shows an insatiable hunger that cannot be satisfied by more attempts to preserve a place at the table as the chair is being pulled out from under every teacher's professional organization across the nation. One can make a strong argument, in fact, that the Obama Administration's early embrace of the Bush education agenda has encouraged the Far Right to move farther right faster, thus opening up public education to threats that are now shocking in their ferocity, velocity, and callousness.

The pending anti-teacher bills speeding through legislative committees in Nashville, Columbus, Trenton, and other state capitols have finally stripped away the fig leaf of "reform" that has previously tried to cover an otherwise naked attempt to achieve corporate control of K-12 education. The harsh measures against teachers, children, and their schools have never been about real achievement or real accountability or real choices or even real "economic competition in the global economy," per the mantra of the Business Roundtable. The great majority of the increasingly-draconian reforms have deformed our schools, in fact, as they serve to mask takeover and control strategies that have placed a stranglehold on teachers and principals and school boards who work in pressure cookers as they strive to achieve the unachievable that gets even more so with each testing season.

When Gerald Bracey, David Berliner, and a handful of other researchers and educators began saying 10 years ago that NCLB was designed to create failed schools, most people wrote them off as nuts. Now that understanding of the impossible Adequate Yearly Progress targets is common wisdom among school board members, parents, and, yes, even some politicians who see that Adequate Yearly Progress has always meant progress toward dismantling public schools. Teachers of poor children have known this in their souls since 2002, but most of them have been so busy trying to perform the impossible that they have not had the time or energy to look inside the political realities that have driven these deforming reforms.

The NCLB chimera with its social justice and civil rights packaging has disguised for too long a monstrous assault on the most vulnerable that leaves achievement gaps gaping as more of the test and punish reforms turn urban teachers against their students, whose scores will determine if

their teachers keeps their jobs. We are reminded, finally, at this late date that NCLB represents the vehicle for the realization of the Reagan education agenda for replacing public education with “free market solutions.” Not new, not a conspiracy, just an agenda forgotten in all the lovely rhetoric about not leaving children behind. A soft padding for a hard fist, which exactly describes the corporate KIPPs and the KIPP knock-offs that will replace the urban public schools unless citizens decide otherwise.

The problem now for the corporate reformers is that the takeover of public education is not happening fast enough, as Americans are sick and growing sicker of the years of strong-arm tactics that have left their children hating school, stressed out, and less prepared for the tests of living—or for competing in the global economy, which was, indeed, exported by the oligarchs some years back as they declared new education disasters. And thus the bare-knuckled actions of Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin and the radicals of the Tennessee Legislature, which finally make the naked realities impossible to ignore any longer.

As the backward social and economic agendas of the anti-democratic corporate oligarchs can no longer wait for their failing reforms to provide the final death blows to end of public education and collective bargaining, so neither can the teachers, parents, and children wait on the sideline to see our workers’ rights and our human rights stifled by the enemies of the public space, which is the only laboratory for democratic living. For even as the teachers have waded through the entire corporate education reform agenda in Tennessee, for instance, these sacrifices have done nothing, obviously, except to escalate the animosity and thuggish attacks on teacher job security, academic freedom, due process, and collective bargaining of Tennessee’s, Wisconsin’s, or New Jersey’s professional corps of dedicated advocates for children who educate the 20 percent of our population that represents a hundred percent of our future, as David Tyack reminds us.

Teachers and parents and students can’t wait any longer to reclaim what has always been theirs, had their energies not been subverted for the past 30 years by phony and endless disaster drills dreamed up by manipulative corporate technocrats. Now is the time to focus all that determination, that fortitude, and that resolve, which heretofore has been wasted on trying to mollify the enemies of the public space—and to reclaim the public space that remains ours even as it has been stolen away by the abusers of power. The time for sitting on the sidelines is over—the oligarchs must take their money and leave us to get back to the business of working to create a more perfect union, rather than colluding to perpetuate a caste system of haves and have nots. Enough. No mas.

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