

Mr. President, Education Is a Human Right, Not a Product

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By [Bill Ayers](#), *Truthout* | *Op-Ed*



President Barack Obama delivers remarks on education and budget priorities, while Jack Lew, Director of the United States Office of Management and Budget, right, and Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education, look on at the Parkville Middle School and Center of Technology, in Baltimore on February 14, 2011. (Photo: Drew Angerer / The New York Times)

The landscape of “educational reform” is currently littered with rubble and ruin and wreckage on all sides. Sadly, your administration has contributed significantly to the mounting catastrophe. You’re not alone: The toxic materials have been assembled as a bipartisan endeavor over many years, and the efforts of the last several administrations are now organized into a coherent push mobilized and led by a merry band of billionaires including Bill Gates, Michael Bloomberg, Sam Walton, and Eli Broad.

Whether inept or clueless or malevolent—who’s to say?—these titans have worked relentlessly to take up all the available space, preaching, persuading, promoting, and, when all else fails, spreading around massive amounts of cash to promote their particular brand of school change as common sense. You and Secretary Arne Duncan—endorsed in your efforts by Newt Gingrich, Paul Ryan, and a host of reactionary politicians and pundits—now bear a major responsibility for that agenda.

The three most trumpeted and simultaneously most destructive aspects of the united “school reform” agenda are these: turning over public assets and spaces to private management; dismantling and opposing any independent, collective voice of teachers; and reducing education to a single narrow metric that claims to recognize an educated person through a test score. While there’s absolutely no substantive proof that this approach improves schooling for children, it chugs along unfazed—fact-free, faith-based reform at its core, resting firmly on rank ideology rather than any evidence whatsoever.

The three pillars of this agenda are nested in a seductive but wholly inaccurate metaphor: Education is a commodity like any other—a car or a refrigerator, a box of bolts or a screwdriver—that is bought and sold in the marketplace. Within this controlling metaphor the schoolhouse is assumed to be a business run by a CEO, with teachers as workers and students as the raw material bumping along the assembly line while information is incrementally stuffed into their little up-turned heads.

It's rather easy to begin to think that “downsizing” the least productive units, “outsourcing” and “privatizing” a space that was once public, is a natural event. Teaching toward a simple standardized measure and relentlessly applying state-administered (but privately developed and quite profitable) tests to determine the “outcomes” (winners and losers) becomes a rational proxy for learning; “zero tolerance” for student misbehavior turns out to be a stand-in for child development or justice; and a range of sanctions on students, teachers, and schools—but never on lawmakers, foundations, corporations, or high officials (they call it “accountability”)—is logical and level-headed.

I urge you to resist these policies and reject the dominant metaphor as wrong in the sense of inaccurate as well as wrong in the sense of immoral.

Education is a fundamental human right, not a product. In a free society education is based on a common faith in the incalculable value of every human being; it's constructed on the principle that the fullest development of all is the condition for the full development of each, and, conversely, that the fullest development of each is the condition for the full development of all. Further, while schooling in every totalitarian society on earth foregrounds obedience and conformity, education in a democracy emphasizes initiative, courage, imagination, and entrepreneurship in order to encourage students to develop minds of their own.

When the aim of education and the sole measure of success is competitive, learning becomes exclusively selfish, and there is no obvious social motive to pursue it. People are turned against one another as every difference becomes a potential deficit. Getting ahead is the primary goal in such places, and mutual assistance, which can be so natural in other human affairs, is severely restricted or banned. It's no wonder that cheating scandals are rampant in our country and fraudulent claims are commonplace.

Race to the Top is but one example of incentivizing bad behavior and backward ideas about education, as the Secretary of Education begins to look and act like a program officer for some charity rather than the leading educator for all children: It's one state against another, this school against that one, and my second grade in fierce competition with the second grade across the hall.

You have opposed privatizing social security, pointing out the terrible risks the market would impose on seniors if the voucher plan were ever adopted. And yet you've supported—in effect—putting the most endangered young people at risk through a similar scheme. We need to expand, deepen, and fortify the public space, especially for the most vulnerable, not turn it over to private managers. The current gold rush of for-profit colleges gobbling up student loans is but one cautionary tale.

You've said that you defend working people and their right to organize and yet you have publicly and noisily maligned teachers and their unions on several occasions. You need to consider that good working conditions are good teaching conditions, and that good teaching conditions are good learning conditions. We can't have the best learning conditions if teachers are forced away from the table, or if the teaching corps is reduced to a team of short-termers and school tourists.

You have declared your support for a deep and rich curriculum for all students regardless of circumstance or background, and yet your policies rely on a relentless regimen of standardized testing, and test scores as the sole measure of progress.

You should certainly pause and reconsider. What's done is done, but you can demonstrate wisdom and true leadership if you pull back now and correct these dreadful mistakes.

In a vibrant democracy, whatever the most privileged parents want for their children must serve as a minimum standard for what we as a community want for all of our children. Arne Duncan attended the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools (as did our three sons); you sent your kids to Lab, and so did your friend Rahm Emanuel. There, students found small classes, abundant resources, and opportunities to experiment and explore, ask questions and pursue answers to the far limits, and a minimum of time-out for standardized testing. They found, as well, a respected and unionized teacher corps, people who were

committed to a life-long career in teaching and who were encouraged to work cooperatively for their mutual benefit (and who never would settle for being judged, assessed, rewarded, or punished based on student test scores).

If it's good enough for you, good enough for the privileged, then it must be good enough for the kids in public schools everywhere—a standard to be aspired to and worked toward. Any other ideal for our schools, in the words of John Dewey who founded the school you chose for your daughters, “is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy.”

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