

Public School Shakedown

By Ruth Conniff

September 5, 2013 - 10:44 am CDT

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fundamental struggle for democracy is going on behind the scenes in statehouses around the country, as a handful of wealthy individuals and foundations pour money into efforts to privatize the public schools.

The implications are huge. But the school privatizers—and their lobbyists—have so muddied the waters that the public does not get a clear picture of what is at stake.

That's why we are launching a new Progressive website, publicschoolshakedown.org—to follow the money and expose the privatizers, and help parents, teachers, and public school supporters

across the country understand what is going on.

Writers Rebecca Kemble and Brendan Fischer expose key components of the shakedown in this issue of the magazine: how the school choice lobby staged a hostile takeover of Wisconsin under Governor Scott Walker, and how the American Legislative Exchange Council is pushing its anti-public-education agenda in all the states.

I attended dramatic hearings in June that went on all day and into the night at the Wisconsin capitol, as legislators on the state's Joint Finance Committee held a cram session on the most controversial aspects of Walker's state budget, including school voucher expansion.

At 5 p.m., I was surrounded by teachers wearing red T-shirts festooned with "No Vouchers" bumper stickers. At 8:15, as the legislators took an interminable and unexplained break, there was a boisterous round of "Solidarity Forever" and "We Shall Not Be Moved." By 1:30 a.m., when the members of the committee finally returned, my former sixth-grade teacher and the other retirees had drifted home to bed.

At one point, Republican state senator Glenn Grothman wandered through the room saying he was just there to see what all the "weirdos" who came to protest looked like.

What they looked like were teachers—middle aged, middle class, mainly women.

I spoke with Erin Proctor, a special ed assistant and president of the Education Assistants' unit of Madison Teachers, Inc; Liz Donnelly, a kindergarten teacher in Madison; and Lora Schmid-Dolan, another Madison teacher.

“We’re here to encourage the Joint Finance Committee to make the right decision and nix those vouchers,” Schmid-Dolan said. “It’s going to decimate public education.”

They didn’t get the chance. The lobbyists and legislators ignored them, and passed their bill in the wee hours after waiting them out.

The committee adjourned at 6 a.m., and Wisconsinites woke up to read about what had happened overnight.

The school privatization lobby managed, through a series of backroom deals and middle-of-the-night votes, to overcome the interests of the people.

Voucherizing public education is a national conservative cause. And Scott Walker is clearly thinking of running for President. If he can say he busted public employee unions and siphoned public school money into private schools, he looks like a pretty radical reformer to the rightwing billionaires who might take an interest in his national political career.

Plus, a whole lot of Republicans in Wisconsin have gotten hooked on the money thrown around in our elections by groups like the American Federation for Children, which recently bragged to its members that it spent \$2,392,000 in Wisconsin—more than in any other state—to influence the 2012 elections.

But representatives of small, rural districts in our legislature—including a few key Republicans—were not so keen on the idea of a school voucher expansion.

For one thing, the schools have not recovered from the massive axe Walker took to education funding in his last budget. After cutting \$1.6 billion, Walker’s budget proposal this time offered no increase in per-pupil spending, and a voucher program added to the problem, draining money from public schools to subsidize private school tuition.

“This dramatic expansion of vouchers leaves me cold,” said Republican state senator Dale Schultz. “We have a hard enough time to support one education system in this state, let alone two.”

In rural districts with low enrollment, the drain on funds could mean saying goodbye to the local school, along with Friday night football games, musicals, and the whole organizing force behind a lot of local communities.

So, Republicans leaders and school choice lobbyists went into a back room with reluctant Republican legislators to twist arms.

“There must have been a lot of dislocated elbows,” Assembly Minority Leader Peter Barca said afterward.

The deal that emerged is a big win for Walker and the school-choice lobby, and a big loss for public education, the poor, and the middle class in Wisconsin.

Republican holdouts accepted an increase of \$150 in funding per public school pupil in exchange for taking vouchers statewide. Keep in mind that the per-pupil cut in the last budget was \$575 per student.

The Department of Public Instruction estimates that the statewide voucher expansion will ultimately drain \$1.9 billion out of the public school system every year. That’s a pretty bad trade for a one-time increase that makes up for only about one-fourth of last year’s cut.

And the voucher program is destined to grow.

Just look at Milwaukee, where vouchers have been in place on an “experimental” basis for twenty-three years. Despite test results that show that voucher students fare worse than their public-school peers in math and reading, the “experiment” is never over. And now Walker is upsizing this failed program to the entire state.

Betsy DeVos, the head of the American Federation for Children, criticized Walker for not going far enough, denouncing a 1,000-student enrollment cap on vouchers that is likely to be temporary. Stay tuned for a no-cap voucher plan.

Milwaukee state representative Jon Richards described the billboards that went up all over his district after the limited voucher experiment began, which insisted that the state lift income and enrollment caps for voucher students. He calls the budget deal “the voucher campaign operative full employment act.”

The voucher expansion is part of an entire budget that “takes money out of things that help the poor and middle class and redistributes the money to the wealthy,” as state representative Cory Mason put it.

Beloit school superintendent Steve McNeal points out that Wisconsin is taking money away from schools that serve the highest poverty populations. Budget cuts and school funding tied to test scores fall most heavily on schools that serve poor kids.

“Education is a way out of poverty,” McNeal says. “Our system should not be a way to keep students in it.”

McNeal praises the teachers in his district, and touted his district’s high-performing schools, its advanced placement classes, its model teacher coaching, reduced class-size programs for low-income kids, and graduation rates that have climbed in recent years.

But budget cuts and vouchers threaten all that, he says.

They threaten small town schools, too.

“You come to a town like Fort Atkinson on a Friday night, and half the town is at the game or the school play,” says Lori Compas, the wedding photographer who ran an unsuccessful recall race against Wisconsin state senate leader Scott Fitzgerald. “You talk about school choice in a small town and people say, ‘What choice?’ There is one school in a twenty-mile radius. To take money out of that one school to send a kid to private school in Milwaukee makes no sense.”

But that is exactly what Walker and the Republicans are doing. Their contempt for their constituents is overpowering.

Ruth Conniff is the political editor of The Progressive.