

Privatization of Public Education Serves Individuals, Undermines the Common Good

from

"The Public Purpose of Public Education"

A Message on Public Education

The United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries

Summary: Privatization, framed as free choice and freedom from government, comes with serious philosophical and moral questions. 1) Is it possible to build an education system giving good choices for each child while providing quality services for all children--wherever they live, whoever their parents, and whatever their abilities or needs? 2) Is a growing reliance on charters and other privatized strategies enabling one set of schools for the most "promising" children, making the traditional public schools a system of last resort? 3) Are we relying on a lifeboat strategy for a relatively few children when instead we need to invest in supporting the public system, especially in poor neighborhoods?

"When a local public school is lost to incompetence, indifference, or despair, it should be an occasion for mourning, for it is a loss of a particular site of possibility. When public education itself is threatened, as it seems to be threatened now--by cynicism and retreat, by the cold rapture of the market, by thin measure and the loss of civic imagination--when this happens, we need to assemble what the classroom can teach us, articulate what we come to know, speak it loudly, hold it fast to the heart."

~ Mike Rose, *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America*

"Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."

~ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

"If the system is sufficiently democratic, public voices can shape the system [and]... each school. There's a value, if we want a democratic society, in having educational institutions recognizing broader responsibilities than their own profit and loss. There's also educational and political value in involving parents and communities as much as possible in the schooling of society's next generation."

~ David Moberg

John Harris Loflin

Education-Community Action Team

Indianapolis

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“The crisis is not about education at all. It’s about power.” ~ James Baldwin

Where does the Indianapolis community stand: Corporatocracy* or Democracy?

As stated in the summary, privatization, framed as free choice and freedom from government, comes with serious philosophical and moral questions.

- Can we have educational choices while providing quality services for all children-- wherever they live, whoever their parents, and whatever their abilities or needs?
- Are more charters and other privatized strategies creating a 2-tiered system?
- Is a “lifeboat strategy” best or is real support of traditional public education better?

"Privatization is a kind of reverse social contract: it dissolves the bonds that tie us together into free communities and democratic republics. It puts us back in the state of nature where we possess a natural right to get whatever we can on our own, but at the same time loses any real ability to secure that to which we have a right... Private choices rest on individual power... Public choices rest on civic rights, common responsibilities, and presume equal rights for all."

~ Benjamin Barber describing the loss of democracy inherent in privatization

While states haven't permitted charter schools to select their students, the following issues continue to plague charters (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012):

- racial and ethnic segregation,
- student/family screening and/or “pushing out” students (Lewin & Medina, 2003; Schott Foundation, 2012) or enabling students/families to "self-select" out (Pulliam, 2013),
- and transportation and other services for so-called disabled, homeless, or ELA students.

“I know Daniels sold the [Indiana] toll road. I know Ballard sold our parking meters, then our water! I know some prisons are run by for-profit companies. Are you telling me IPS is selling out? No, that ain’t gonna happen. Coca Cola or Eli Lilly’s ain’t runnin’ IPS.” ~ Anonymous

Though more charter than public school graduates go to college, research shows that during middle school or the early years of high school, many charters "shed back" into the public schools less promising students or those with behavior problems (Heilig, 2011). These students are therefore not counted as part of the charter school's graduating class.

In Indianapolis, the Tindley charter (#6208) had 61 9th graders. Three years later, they had 30 seniors of which 27 graduated giving Tindley a 2013 grad rate of 90%--even though they “lost” 55.7% of the original cohort. <http://www.doe.in.gov/accountability/graduation-cohort-rate>

We cannot forget that our public schools, due to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, are under tremendous pressure to perform (i.e., produce students who are good state-level standardized test takers). However, charters are under even greater scrutiny because they challenge tradition public schooling approaches.

So, charters must succeed; and, it appears they will--one way or the other.

Is the civil right to education being redefined as the right to school choice?

In a 2010 pastoral letter, the Board of the National Council of Churches warned,

"We are concerned today when we hear the civil right to education being redefined as the right to school choice, for we know that equitable access to opportunity is more difficult to ensure in a mass of privatized alternatives to traditional public schools We must continue to expect public school districts to provide a complete range of services accessible to children in every neighborhood of our cities."

Major studies have indicated that charter schools are racially and ethnically more segregated than the public schools in their communities (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley & Wang, 2012).

What happens to children not chosen or whose parents are not active choosers?

What is the government's moral and fiscal responsibility to the students remaining in the neighborhood public schools? Justice is systemic and can be realized only when society's laws and institutions provide access for all children, not just for those who can manage to climb into a situation described by choice advocates as some sort of "lifeboat" out of poverty.

Does privatization turns parents into consumers shopping at the supermarket?

In a marketplace where parents are encouraged to satisfy their particular family's desires by choosing schools that most perfectly meet the needs of their own children, *education's goal is redefined with a private rather than a public purpose*. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), an organization that pairs state legislators with corporate lobbyists to promote privatization, re-defines the goal of mass education as pleasing individual parent-consumers with a smorgasbord of choices (Underwood, 2012).

A "supermarket," however, is different from a civic institution like public schools:

"The civic calling [of public institutions]...points to collaborative norms and an ethics of care in which relationships between persons, rather than individual rights or individual preferences, are a primary focus..."
~ Benjamin Barber

Does privatization leaves the public unprotected?

Proponents of privatization say creativity and innovation will blossom if schools are freed from the government bureaucracy. But, who will watch the managers of charter networks and for-profit Education Management Organizations (EMOs) and those pushing vouchers?

"Market competition favors the already powerful and if you unleash competition, then schools which are powerful from the start, are going to thrive and those that are not powerful are not magically somehow able to develop the ability to compete."

~ Pamela Grundy, Parents Across America, Charlotte, NC

The very business nature of privatization mandates profits or the growth of their particular enterprise be the bottom-line, not the good of the public.

This creates the likelihood of a "nexus of corruption" where privatization and patronage (crony capitalism) and where the real "innovation and creativity" to make big and easy profits are inspired (Krugman, 2012).

This is best exemplified by the relationship between the Indiana Superintendent Dr. Tony Bennett and the Florida-based Charter Schools USA company (Martin, 2014).

Indiana/Indianapolis charters have no federal oversight

Charter schools offer many examples of the problems arising from privatization. At the same time federal policies are driving the rapid proliferation of charter schools, the federal

government has proposed no federal oversight. Charter schools continue to be regulated solely in state law. This is not good in a state like Indiana and in a city like Indianapolis where the Republicans and corporate-Democrats (i.e., neo-liberals) have all the educational reform money and power.

Powerful individuals have been able to leverage their political connections for the benefit of their own chains of schools, but not necessarily for the good of the public (Powell, 2012).

The erosion democracy: corporate takeover of public schools

“True democracy doesn’t use education to move the worker-citizen from unskilled to skilled. Instead, it relies on education to position every citizen to govern. This project of democratic education can be carried out only by educators with the critical commitment to act on behalf of freedom and social justice that serve as a model for their students to discover their own personal power, social transformative potential, and most of all their spirit of hope.”

~ Antonia Darnier, social critic

One of the most disturbing aspects of privatized school reform is the loss of democracy itself as parents have nowhere to turn to provide input into their children's placement or to seek redress when they need to appeal a decision that affects their child.

Very often large scale privatization has been implemented in school districts where the power of the school board has already been abrogated through mayoral governance with an appointed school board or the imposition of state control by a governor as is the case in 2010 in New Orleans and in 2011 in Michigan.

In a public system, locally elected school boards protect at least some access for parents and the community to experience and practice democracy. However, is this the case when school board seats come to the highest bidder?

Another way to misuse democratic processes is a sort of “reverse takeover” move where groups like Stand for Children become akin to “corporate raiders” when they lead the organization of persons or entities to “buy” school board seats (Brown, 2014a) with thousands, even hundreds of thousands of dollars (Brown, 2014b).

“Then there’s the obscenity of outside influence and \$300,000 to \$500,000 in outside money which bought three seats on the IPS school board.” ~ Amos Brown III, 10.23.14

And, following this we have a community leader, who is also an ordained Baptist minister, use a “circular reasoning” (Urban Dictionary, n.d.) to rationalize the “purchase” of school board seats and thus stifle debate: “No matter how you view it, no one can ‘buy’ an election without a majority of people voting for the candidate” (Russell, 2014).

Consequently, due to the *huge* amounts of funds in the campaign chests of the 2012 corporate reform IPS candidates (Loflin, 2013) and the winners of the 2014 school board races (Colombo, 2014), will our Indianapolis Public Schools have a school board run by business interests?

Has privatization begun to affect how we see public education?

Marketplace language and values have also begun to creep into thinking about public school policy, undermining the moral bedrock of the public system. For example, a growing percentage of federal funding for education is being allocated according to the marketplace value of competition. Federal competitive programs include Race to the Top and School

Improvement Grants--"best practice" programs that require states and school districts to submit formal proposals to be evaluated by panels of judges.

"If the system is sufficiently democratic, public voices can shape the system [and]...each school. There's a value, if we want a democratic society, in having educational institutions recognizing broader responsibilities than their own profit and loss. There's also educational and political value in involving parents and communities as much as possible in the schooling of society's next generation"
~ David Moberg (Loflin, 2012)

The challenge, of course, is that *races with winners always create losers*. When 38 states were losers in the original Race to the Top competition, all the children in those states were losers.

"There are those who would make the case for having a 'Race to the Top.' This is great for those who can run. Instead, 'lift from the bottom' is the moral imperative because it includes everybody. We should be fighting for one set of rules--a common foundation beneath which no child falls."
~ Rev. Jessie Jackson

Can the public recover the moral promise of public education?

"What are at-risk children at-risk of doing? In plain language, at-risk children are at-risk of turning the poverty and prejudice they experience against society rather than learning how to conform and take their "proper" place. The children are misadjusting, and it is their teacher's role to make that maladjustment functional and creative rather than to suppress it."
~ Herbert Kohl in "I Won't Learn from You"

Today, unions, community groups, and organizations must act on their heritages of social justice and begin deep conversations about the public purpose of public education with the State Board of Education and the IPS school board. Such dialogue must include groups like the NAACP, the Urban League, the Marion County Commission on Youth, and particularly the faith community: the Church Federation of Indianapolis, the City Mosaic Partnership of Churches, The Baptist Alliance, Concerned Clergy, the 10 Point Coalition, the Indianapolis Peace & Justice Center, and the Faith and Labor Coalition.

The United Church of Christ as an example of valuing the democratic governance of our public schools

"We support democratic governance of public schools. Because public schools are responsible to the public, it is possible through elected school boards, open meetings, transparent record keeping and redress through the courts to ensure that traditional public schools provide access for all children. We believe that democratic operation of public schools is our best hope for ensuring that families can secure the services to which their children have a right. On balance, we believe that if government invests public funds in charter schools that report to private boards, government, not the vicissitudes of the marketplace, should be expected to provide oversight to protect the common good."

~ The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA

At least 12 resolutions endorsing education as a project of the public were passed by the UCC's General Synods, upholding the ethos of a democratically controlled public school system:

"The public schools belong to us, the people, and are controllable by democratic means. We can and must act to protect the public schools against those who slander them out of hidden anti-democratic, racial or class biases. But most particularly, we must protect the children in those schools, for such is not only the kingdom of heaven but also the future of our country and of the yet-to-be-realized democratic dream of equal opportunity for all ..."
~ Benjamin Barber

These are hollow statements unless, in this new gilded age, we can learn to speak with one voice to turn the attention of our political and business leaders to the urgent necessity for improving public schools in our poorest communities.

Do market-based education policies pushing charters into poor neighborhoods actually enable the neglect of the larger, more pressing social-economic problems in those areas?

“Our federal government is the primary tool for equalizing educational opportunity as a civil right for every child.” ~ Jan Resseger, 2012

Privatization undermines public purpose and the capacity of government to protect the public through well-regulated institutions. Poverty, income inequality and segregation by income as well as race are public problems best addressed systemically on a scale that can be accomplished only by our government.

“We reject the language of business for discussing public education.”
~ The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA

Fabricant and Fine (2012) discuss the “neglect” of public education that brought privatization:

"Ultimately, charter [school] policy hides a profound failure of political will--more specifically, a failure of business, legislative, and media leadership to support the kinds of budgets, taxation, and targeted investment necessary to revive public education as a key element of social and economic development and racial justice in the poorest communities.

While individual charter schools might or might not serve well the children in their community, the charter campaign's influence on national policy is ultimately a deception ... that benefits a few at the expense of many...[It is] a market based political solution grafted onto growing inequality and an intensifying neglect of social crisis in the poorest areas."

In conclusion: Where does the Indianapolis community stand: Democracy or Corporatocracy?

As America tries to sell democracy abroad, the corporatization of IPS is worrisome. Having a less "public" public school system makes little sense. It is in the self-interests of the faith community to answer the "serious philosophical and moral" issues posed here. Simply put, the faith community cannot ignore the current local debate over charters vs. IPS. It has to answer and act on a basic question: *What does a democracy require of its schools?*

*Corporatocracy: A society or system that is governed or controlled by corporations or corporate interests. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/corporatocracy>

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