

# How to Avoid the Dangers of Privatization: The Last Choice for Public Education

If public schools are seen as incapable of responding to the demand for wholesale reform, why should we expect the public to resist privatization? (Meier, 1991a:268).

There are certainly many reasons for public school educators to wake up and smell the coffee these days. None seems more compelling than the imminent danger of an invasion by the private sector, a formidable army using, as its main weapon, the very same tool that should be employed by public schools in its last ditch effort to save its viability: choice.

It is in this light that I beg to differ with Mr. Tancredo regarding his depiction of choice as an apolitical issue (Tancredo, 1992). As Paulo Friere notes: "Education is *always* political" (Tewksberry, 1981:15). Although choice means different things to different people, there should be no mistake about what it means to the political right wing. Constantly looking for ways to "desocialize" the school system, these conservative critics speak in terms of "efficiency", "market driven competition" and the "products" of educational programs (Morson, 1992). Editorials in business journals decry leaving school reform to the educators, instead suggesting the possibilities of corporate-owned schools and voucher systems (Putka, 1989). In these circles choice clearly means public funds for private schools and school systems influenced directly by the business world's needs, interests and procedural schemes.

The most recent evidence of this trend is, of course, George Bush's Education 2000 plan which offers the trappings of a school choice system along with a heavy dose of private sector involvement. The plan emphasizes businesses' role in research and development and the creation of "model" schools that supposedly would reflect the business community's perception of what constitutes "good" or "effective" education. Most conservatives have

hailed the plan, viewing it as a means to an end: the privatization of the public school system and the long awaited arrival of an at-large voucher system.

Before we accept the argument that the private sector will cure all of our ills, however, let's examine some of the realities. There are certainly some major areas of concern when it comes to the privatization of the school system. The most obvious of these has to do with equity and the democratic principles of public schooling. As one public school educator puts it, there are some people who have "never bought into the idea of education for all the people" (Morson, 1992:32). A pure voucher system would tap directly into public funds and private schools would still retain their power to be selective. It's probable that the public school system would be left with the most difficult students of the school population. So much for the wonderful democratic ideal of, at the very least, *offering* an opportunity for education to all of our children.

It is also likely that most private schools would remain out of financial reach for the majority of our school population simply by charging above and beyond the voucher limit. So much for economic justice and equal education for all. Or as Karp (1991:20) puts it: "The inequalities created by the markets in housing and health care are much more indicative of what to expect" from a school voucher plan.

And there is more! One prominent idea is that the free market mechanism will force improvements in the school system by allowing parents to leave weak schools and choose better ones. This, of course, smacks of the deregulation rhetoric of the conservatives. Interestingly, there is much recent and dramatic evidence of the failure of deregulation in the private sector. Witness, if you will, the S & L crisis and the sorry state of the airlines and cable television industries. As George Kaplan (1991:36) so succinctly states: "Where did we get the idea that industry and commerce are doing so much better than the schools?".

In fact there is no hard evidence, even with all of its selectivity and smaller teacher-student ratios, that private schools actually outperform public schools. In Colorado, a 1991 study determined that SAT mathematics scores were significantly higher for public school graduates and that verbal ability scores were virtually the same (Richardson, 1992).

Furthermore, the recent Milwaukee experiment, trotted out regularly by Tancredo and other conservatives as an example of a successful private school choice plan, is turning out to be a nightmare for the right wing. Follow-up results compiled by the University of Wisconsin reveal that those inner-city students

who opted for private schools did not improve their performance on the very same kinds of standardized achievement measures that conservatives like to brand the public schools with. Moreover, out of the 1,000 or so students who applied for the program, only 400 were accepted and enrollment eventually dropped well below 300 (Karp,1991). The immediate question is who ends up with the major responsibility for educating the 46,000 “eligible” students for a program such as this? The answer is obvious-the public schools.

Another important and related issue has to do with what Jack Gordan (1991:8) refers to as the “arrogance” of business rhetoric when it comes to educational reform. He warns of hidden agendas and not-so-hidden hypocrisies. Business demands efficiency from its work force and will go so far as to discard education in the name of training. Gordan feels that all this talk about developing critical thinking is malarky. Corporations are really looking for a worker “whose critical faculties come with an off-on switch”, especially when it involves real democratic decision making in the workplace. Some machine-shop owners in New York, for example, stated that that they didn’t want their workers learning about the job costing process because they feared that they would then be able to determine the profit on a job (Roditi,1992).

Other distortions are more blatant. Let us closely examine the actual kinds of jobs available in the near future. Most experts would agree that there is not going to be a great demand for highly skilled workers. How about the need for those highly qualified workers we keep hearing about from the business community? “ It’s a sham”, Herbert Kohl (Nathan,1991:697) contends. “ If the corporations employed hundreds of thousands of well-qualified technical and professional workers who command high salaries, they couldn’t possibly squeeze out the profits they demand”.

Even more disturbing and hypocritical is the growing scarcity of unskilled jobs. A routine check of the business section of any American newspaper will reveal that Motorola is building a \$120 million factory in northern China (Rocky Mountain News, March 28, 1992, p.66) or GM, after laying off 75,000 American workers, has just hired a fresh (and cheap) workforce for its new truck plant overseas. What are we to say when U.S. corporations continually bemoan the poor quality of the “ products” of the American educational system when even the unskilled jobs are being farmed out to cheaper workforces.

It is within this treacherous context then that those of us who would save the public school system must fend off the attack. Most emphatically, we must

deny the co-opting of the choice issue by the private sector. After all, we are talking about two very different concepts of choice. We should quickly be alarmed when Bush's Education 2000 program advocates a national core curriculum in which standardized testing is prominently displayed as a valid means of measuring "progress". Most serious educators believe as Elliot Eisner (1992) does about the authentic meaning of education:

Education is about learning how to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity. It is about learning how to savor the quality of the journey. It is about becoming critically minded and intellectually curious, and it is about learning how to frame and pursue your own educational aims. It is not about regaining our competitive edge (p.723).

### **Public School Choice**

In public education we are talking about real choices not just deciding which cola we prefer or what network news to watch. Educators such as Deborah Meier believe that meaningful choice is the last bastion for public education. She contends that we must enthusiastically support schools of choice, making "alternative schools" the mainstream ( Meier,1991a).

"Choice is fully compatible with public education..." (p.268), states Meier. She uses the District 4 story from New York to illustrate the positive impact of a system that truly encouraged the creation of different, innovative kinds of schools, schools which "developed ,over time, differences in pedagogy, style of leadership, forms of governance, tone and climate" (p.268). Although she cautions that choice alone will offer no guaranteed solutions to the problems of public schools, Meier notes that it fits well with many school reform strategies. Choice promotes school-based autonomy and decision making while giving parents and children some real power regarding their educational futures. "By using choice judiciously" ,Meier contends, " we can have the virtues of the market place without some of its vices" (p.271).

Unfortunately, some of the stiffest opposition to public school choice plans comes from the superintendent's office. Public school administrations seem bent on maintaining the status quo and holding on to their sense of centralized

power. They are apparently reluctant to let students, parents and teachers invent their own schools.

Other public school administrators and school reformers attack public school choice as “elitist” in nature and limited in scope and applicability. They take the view that innovative schools of choice are “inherently unfair because they provide for a lucky few a quality education that remains inaccessible to the vast majority” (Meier, 1991b, p.338). They worry about the big picture ignoring the fact that change needs to come from the roots in the form of creative and courageous teachers, parents and students who are committed to their public schools and to the basic principles of democracy.

An accurate and unfortunate example of this opposition comes out of the Colorado state legislature where House Bill 1299 would have created a statewide independent school district composed of innovative *public* schools of choice. The legislation was endorsed by the Colorado Teachers’ Federation and some prominent community members from a broad political spectrum. One of the Bill’s chief critics turned out to be the Denver Public School administration. Recently, the bill was killed in senate committee, but surely its time has come.

Finally then, the question is: When will the public schools wake up and realize that authentic school choice ,with genuine differences in curricula and approach, is their “court of last resort”? Most of us feel as Anne Lewis (1992:581) does when she states: “ Schools are not the tools of capitalism, but they are the foundations of democracy”. If we are to prevent the private sector from turning the schools into training grounds for corporations; if we are to stop the regression to the “good old days “ when education was for some but not for others, then we must encourage meaningful choices in the public school system now.

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