

NO PUBLIC EDUCATION BY CORPORATION

The Privatization Assault on Public Education Intensifies

Do you remember the Excellence in Education movement, along with the Time on Task idea, and the Assertive Discipline model? These efforts to bring about educational reform followed the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This report popularized many of the privatization notions regarding public education. I refer to this as Phase I of the movement to privatize public education.

Ronald Reagan was President and globalization was picking up steam as our automakers were being pounded by Japanese imports. When evaluating our public school system, it was asserted that, if a foreign power had actively engaged in the degradation of our educational system to the current state, it would have been considered guilty of an act of war.

There were multiple indicators that pointed to the mediocrity of our educational system. There was much discussion and concern about international comparisons of student achievement, functional illiteracy, standardized test scores, higher-order thinking skills, graduation rates from college and the endemic complaint from the business and military sector that they were spending millions in remedial education for their workforce or recruits. These deficiencies drew attention as globalization began to affect our competitive edge in the world market and as the integration of computer technology into industrial production increased.

Ten years after *A Nation at Risk* was published, high schools had lost a large portion of their applied and fine arts offerings. The curriculum shifted to favoring academic classes. While our colleagues in career and vocational education faced drastic reductions in their ranks, union leadership, legislators and the rest of us were busy debating and assisting in the development of Phase II of the privatization movement. During this phase, the charter

school and accountability movement swept the nation in various forms, with varied consequences.

Phase II reached its high point with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. NCLB fully opened the door to the private sector and promoted the notion that, if left to the market; public education would improve or perish. NCLB has set up the infrastructure for the transfer of public education to the private sector. In fact, the transfer of public education to private corporations is the real goal of the NCLB Act.

In order to achieve their privatization ends, the authors of NCLB needed some way to portray very large numbers of schools as failing. To do this they introduced the use of test result data in a way that is not statistically defensible.

Make no mistake: we need good and frequent measures of student progress and we need to identify those schools that are truly failing in order to help them improve. However, this will not be achieved through a manipulation of data that fails to measure student progress and instead relies on the measurement of successive years of students at the same school site. Under the strictly enforced NCLB guidelines, schools that fail to meet the standards are placed into something called Program Improvement status.

Schools that are deemed to be in Program Improvement (PI) status are subject to ever more severe sanctions as the years pass, culminating with the closure of the school or the transformation of the school into a charter school. These schools can then be run by a private charter school operator for profit.

The first shift of federal Title I dollars from our schools to the private sector occurs at Year 2 of Program Improvement with the requirement of contracting out of supplemental educational services to organizations not affiliated with the school district.

President George W. Bush is now calling for the reauthorization of NCLB. He has asked that the reauthorization include the funding of vouchers that can be used for a private school education, for those who wish to leave Program Improvement schools.

The short-comings of vouchers are well-known. One large problem being that vouchers cannot pay for even half the tuition for private education and therefore are of little or no use to families with low or poverty level incomes. In other words, vouchers promote middle class flight from public schools.

The trap of NCLB is that educators and schools cannot win the game. We are wasting time and needed funds in attempting to comply with a statistically impossible law designed to define public education as failure. Because of the way the long-term goals of NCLB are defined most, if not all, public schools will be in Program Improvement by the year 2014. NCLB assumes that each successive class of students will be significantly better than the classes before it and that this improvement can continue forever. This is a statistical impossibility. I agree with Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-CA), that NCLB, as it is currently written, must not be re-authorized by the U.S. Congress.

Phase III of the privatization of public education made its debut in December of 2006 in the form of the book, *Tough Choices or Tough Times*. Phase III is the plan for the final dismantlement of public education as we know it. The basic thesis of the book is that we must make difficult choices or we will face economic disaster. The essential “tough choice,” as far as the book is concerned, is privatization of public education. Phase III is the final frontal assault on public education that will result not only in privatization but also, as an intended consequence, the elimination of collective bargaining in public education.

Again, make no mistake: we very much do need educational reform, true accountability and a realistic level of governmental financial support. We do not need phony reform based upon statistical manipulation, unreachable benchmarks and an agenda of privatization.

Today, *Tough Choices or Tough Times* defines the problem we face as a nation in similar terms as in the first wave of assaults. According to the privatization proponents, the need to privatize is based on the assumption that privatization is the answer to a number of well known observations: the American worker, in order to compete with the global worker and to maintain and fund the American dream, must be at least college prepared; our public schools are not producing an adequate number of college graduates needed for our knowledge worker based economy, particularly in the fields of mathematics and engineering, where the need is most acute; the globalization process is largely complete and those middle class jobs of the past, requiring not more than a secondary education, are gone forever.

The answer to these long-standing and very real situations is not privatization of public education. The correct answer lies in moving promptly to adequate funding of public education.

The solutions to the problems, as seen by the authors of *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, include the following:

- The elimination of school boards of education since corporations have no need for an elected school board.
- The increase of teachers' salaries through the elimination of the current defined benefit pension plans so common in the public school sector to fund such pay increases.
- The reduction of the high school dropout rate to one percent.
- The discontinuation of public school education at age sixteen for those students who fail to pass rigorous examinations to move on to college preparatory work.

And how will all these changes be achieved? They will be accomplished by the elimination of our neighborhood public schools and the formation of "contract" schools to be operated mostly by for-profit corporations and non-profit organizations.

Phase III of the privatization of public education has begun. We cannot stand idle and watch as the conversion from public hands to private hands takes place. In the past twenty years we have failed to adequately denounce this shameless dismantling of our public schools and most especially the false premises upon which the privatization arguments are based.

The architects of Phase III are well-funded and are hard at work as we sit and watch. We cannot remain passive and allow a federally facilitated corporate takeover of public education to occur.

We must not regard falsehood as fact and the misuse of data as proof. We must stop Phase III or the entire nation will be at risk of public education becoming a commodity sold to local governments by private corporations.

George L. Martinez
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