Parties in Privatizing American Public Education

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Summary

The education privatizers (school choice advocates) see public education as a resource-rich marketplace, with charter schools and voucher programs as ways to redirect public dollars to support private ends. By contrast, privatization opponents believe this approach does not improve student outcomes while it undermines public schools and democratic citizenship. Understanding the education privatization agenda and recognizing the political forces shaping it, the players at national and state levels advancing it (often without public awareness), and the research findings on charter school and voucher effectiveness can help educators identify education privatization proposals and comprehend their implications for public schools and communities.

In 1999, The Economist touted education as the next big investment zone, “ripe for privatization,” similar to private takeovers in the defense and healthcare industries. Likewise, in his 2012 annual report, Pearson CEO John Fallon asserted, “education will ... be the great growth industry of the 21st Century.” It is easy to see why. American public schools spent over $600 billion for the 2013–2014 school year, representing 9% of the U.S. economy. From 2005 to 2011, private venture capital in the education market grew from $13 million to $389 million. With so much public money on the table, investors find tapping into education dollars—with little oversight or liability—an attractive prospect.

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America is privatizing her public higher education institutions. Largely without serious public policy analysis or debate, a series of individual state budget and revenue decisions over the past decade have made states increasingly small shareholders in their public colleges and universities. (p. 6) This case study is a portion of a much larger critical theory study designed to call attention to the peril facing public education in America. The Case of Virginia. The higher education environment in Pennsylvania was already primed for privatization. Privatizing American public, Page 5. Journal of Case Studies in Education. when Governor Corbett was elected to office in 2010, vowing to avoid a tax hike in spite of a budget deficit of four billion dollars (Kelderman, 2012c). Critics of privatization also charge that lucrative contracts may be given to political allies, relatives or friends of public officials and that subsequently, these contractors may not qualified to do the work and/or may provide less quality to the general public. For example, in 2006 the LA Times reported on this pattern in an article stating that for "Indianapolis, New Orleans, Atlanta and other cities, privatization has been accompanied by corruption scandals, environmental violations and a torrent of customer complaints."[9]. Another criticism of privatization, particularly in r Despite their negative perception, public-private partnerships can benefit American education. Privatization has multiple definitions, none of which depicts private-sector involvement in public education in a good light. In the end, the anti-privatization crowd believes private companies should not make a profit from doing business with public education or government institutions. So how did we get here? The 1980s saw three important developments that gave rise to this prevailing attitude. The first was the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980. Reagan campaigned for the White House on a theme of efficiency, promising to make the federal government run more like a business. One Given the recent rhetoric of education reform's critics, one might be forgiven for thinking that American private schools are at the peak of their influence. In a video produced by the Network on Education Policy, scholar-turned-activist Diane Ravitch claims that the “privatization movement—charters and vouchers—is moving forward full speed ahead, defunding public schools, using test scores to say public schools aren't good enough. The question before us is how can we stop this steamroller that's destroying the public sector, that wants to privatize everything, that wants to turn us from citiz