

Corporatizing Public Education—Problems, Pitfalls, and Questions to Consider

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The idea of privatization of the traditional U.S. public school system is a relatively recent historical phenomenon. The growing trend towards allowing private enterprises to become active players in the development and delivery of classroom learning is assumed to be a “public good.” The following commentary provides a cursory look at the impact market encroachment, largely in the form of charters, is having on traditional schools, as well as various social, political and educational issues to consider as market-driven initiatives become increasingly part of the public school domain.

Returning to the Tapestry

Nearly two centuries ago, Horace Mann’s Common School movement coalesced and expanded public schooling for the masses, which previously was nothing more than a patchwork of educational options—apprenticeships, home schooling, tutoring, parochial, public and quasi-public schools—for those who desired upward social mobility (Cremin, 1980). Mann strongly argued that nationwide compulsory schooling was the key to political stability, good citizenship, and social well-being (Spring, 2010). He wrote: “Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery” (Mann, 1865, p. 669). By the opening of the 20th century, tax-supported government-sponsored schools became foundational to the American way of life and the egalitarian principles that drove Mann’s vision of the common school have guided our assumptions about public education ever since (Hayes, 2006). Yet, currently, there are those who contend that Mann’s “equalizing” goals have fallen short amid failing public schools and districts. Today, the institutional tapestry preceding Mann is being revived, as free market enterprises sunder civic access and services, deepening the country’s already historical racial and economic divides.

Over the past three decades, free market reformers have focused on public education as a prime target to unravel—analogue to other public domains such as healthcare, social security, and military defense. Alliances internal to this movement are, by and large, not educators but billionaire entrepreneurs, hedge fund managers, private investors and contractors, and even religious organizations, who insist that children are not achieving “equalization” in academically subpar traditional schools and can benefit from other choices (Lubienski, 2014; McGroarty, 2001). The educationese of “school choice” takes on a number of different political meanings and outcomes—from enhancing the quality of education for all students via the creation of new schools and programs, to defunding public schools and transforming them into centers of corporate control and profit (Lipman, 2011; Saltman, 2009). A number of market school reform enterprises have been shown to maneuver under the rhetoric of the former as a means of surreptitiously attaining the latter (Ravitch, 2013). This has been done through a set of privatized educational menu options that students and families openly select from, including non- and for-

profit charter schools, online education institutions, voucher programs, and tuition or scholarship tax credits.

The case for corporatizing public education is undergirded by a neoliberal philosophy that views government as inefficient and costly (see, for example, Baker & Miron, 2015; Saltman, 2009; Smith, 2006). Thus, in order to reduce bureaucratic red tape and expenditures, neoliberalism calls for state-controlled capital goods and services to be unrestricted and delivered by competitive agencies (Hill, 2006). The ultimate goal of free market school reformers, as they would argue, “is not to eliminate the government altogether, but rather to leverage the power of the market to produce better quality public goods and services, increase citizen/consumer satisfaction, and to do so at a reasonable cost” (Smith, 2003, p.6). Those opposed to this rationale insist that non-state interventions are not genuinely concerned with the welfare of all citizens and students, but rather opportunistically desire to advance their own ideology or bottom lines by siphoning tax dollars away from a public entity worth \$1.3 trillion nationwide, undermining the ideals of civic integration and social harmony that Mann vehemently stressed was a central function of commonwealth education (Hayes, 2006; Lipman, 2011).

Amid debates over fragmenting traditional public schools, there exists a naïve misimpression that the push to have these facilities operate like businesses is strictly a conservative, right-wing ideology. If treating public education as a retail store was hailed solely by Republicans, there might be vigorous backlash from the opposing camp. Yet, market-oriented crusades embodied in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 have been sponsored by strange bedfellows across party lines that see privatizing reforms as necessary solutions to problems existing within public education (Lipman, 2004). Federal administrations under Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama, for instance, recognized that neighborhood public schools have not delivered on the promise of “equalizing” and thus actively spent billions of dollars to increase choice options (Strauss, 2017).

Despite this bipartisan support over the years, choice reform has become a focal tenet of Republican platforms. This political coterie vigorously lobbies for the private reorganization of schools, arguing that free market mechanisms generate competition and stimulate curricular innovation and efficiency where rigid, rule-bound bureaucracies have failed to do so (Ravitch, 2013). Business-oriented approaches to school reform have been made more explicit under the current administration of President Donald Trump, who proposes to cut \$9.2 billion, or 13.6% of the U.S. Department of Education’s funding, while directing \$1.4 billion of new money into school choice options (Brown et al., 2017).

Charter School System Glitches: Effectiveness, Segregation and Transparency

One market-based option positioned at the top of education reform menus is charter schools. These often corporate funded bodies have materialized nationally in different fashions—from small, community-based independent operations to larger charter management organizations (CMOs), such as KIPP and Uncommon Schools, or education management organizations (EMOs), such as Edison Learning and the online school company K12, to multi-campus, vendor operated schools (VOS) like National Heritage Academies and hybrid networks (a conflation of VOS and CMO/EMO systems, such as Chicago International Charter Schools).

The first state to pass charter legislation was Minnesota, in 1991 (Hill, 2005). Forty-three states and the District of Columbia now permit charters and currently more than 6,900 exist across the United States, enrolling an estimated 3.1 million students (CER, 2017; NEA 2017). Charter schools, in their early incubation, served as grassroots prototypes for how to reinvigorate declining traditional public schools, as well as reassure families, impeded by them, of social mobility (Weil, 2009). With relatively more autonomy from government regulations than traditional schools, many of these institutional hybrids design their own curriculum, extend their school day and academic year, and give teachers greater decision making roles in devising their lesson plans. The trade-offs, however, for educators working in certain charters involves having to teach longer hours with no compensation and strictly preparing students for college entrance and state testing, as well as being deterred from forming or joining teacher unions (Loewus, 2017; Monahan, 2014; Ravitch, 2013; Rizga, 2018).

Alleged Institutional Efficacy

Relatively current research has shown that students from various states have benefited from attending high quality school choice networks such as the Harlem Children’s Zone Promise Academies in New York or the BASIS schools headquartered in Arizona or the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) schools dispersed throughout the US (Angrist et al., 2011; CREDO, 2013; CREDO, 2017). An overwhelming majority of youth enrolled at the above charter networks are black and Latino, coming from low-income, single-parent families (Mead et al., 2015). The capacity of these schools to nurture the social and academic needs of students, in preparation for college, clearly supports the political platform of free market reformers.

“Choice” rhetoric has always made the point of addressing the aggravation of parents with the quality of public schools, especially those located in deprived communities of color. Over the years, charter companies and schools have promised “safer, elite-supported forms of education that will lead to more successful career trajectories” (Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 34), which helps attract minority youth and their families. Although academic gains have been reported by major charter precincts, specifically in areas of reading and math, overall network-level charter performances across the country have fluctuated immensely. National charter school studies like those undertaken by Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) note: “While a handful of the highest performing charter sectors have figured out a way to provide superior, or at least equivalent, levels of academic growth relative to local TPS [traditional public schools] for every student subgroup (e.g. Boston and Newark), many strong charter sectors nonetheless fail to provide strong growth for every sector of their student population” (CREDO, 2017, p. 37).

School (Hyper) Segregation

Beyond uneven performance results, charters schools, as a cog within a larger privatizing machine, reveal other ethical implications in how they function and their impact on the public sphere. One of the more overt concerns with charters is their failure to make good on an early promise to actualize *Brown v. Board*, which of course has not fully materialized in traditional public schools either—whether urban, suburban or rural (Hall, 2014; Whitehurst, et al., 2016). Voluminous research on charters over the past decade has shown that these institutions actually

intensify racial and economic segregation more so than public schools, as they are largely concentrated in urban areas (CREDO, 2015; Garcia, 2007; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). Charter enrollment figures have indeed evidenced greater levels of minority segregation with low-income, black students more extensively subscribed in these choice facilities, given their only alternative is to attend a failing neighborhood public school (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). A 2010 UCLA study confirmed that “Forty-three percent of black charter school students attended these extremely isolated minority schools, a percentage which was, by far, the highest of any other racial group, and nearly three times as high as black students in traditional public schools” (Frankenberg et al., 2010, p.4). Data from this report included forty states, the District of Columbia and several dozen urban charters with sizable student enrollment.

Hidden Transparency

In order to operate and stay open for the length of their contract (typically five years), charters depend on millions of public and private dollars to cover operational costs. How this money is spent, and on what, is often obscured or unknown to the public? Hence, a less publicized matter surrounding charters is the transparency of their annual expenditures. The Center for Media and Democracy (CMD), a nationally-recognized charter school watchdog, found that information from the federal government’s Charter School Program (CSP) on charter spending was lacking at best (Tell, 2015). According to the report, federal and state governments, along with charter authorizers, generally do not offer the public complete information about how federal funds for charters are used (Tell, 2015). To compound this, the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) in 2015 detailed some of the conspicuous ways that contractors, companies, and organizations secure financial gain and generate profit by controlling and running charter schools. The report’s authors, Bruce Baker and Gary Miron, asserted: “Current disclosure requirements make it unlikely that any related legal violations, ethical concerns, or merely bad policies and practices are not realized until clever investigative reporting, whistleblowers or litigation brings them to light” (Baker & Miron, 2015, p. 56).

Charter school privatization, more broadly conceived, represents further compromise to public education—perhaps something more “hidden” in its effects. Dating back fifteen years, mechanisms of accountability and performance inserted into NCLB re-oriented the work of schools, making it quite easy to engender a competitive, consumerist ethos within public education (Sturges, 2015). Underfunded schools with overworked teachers unable to reach government-set benchmarks were tagged as “failing” and shut down or “turned around,” ushering in a mode of choice options and privatizing alliances which eventually co-opted grassroots charter initiatives (Saltman, 2009). Scholars claim that the growing exchange of education as a public good to a private one is not only altering the way education is organized and delivered, but also how it is being experienced—turning parents into consumers, educators into technicians, and students into metricized outcomes (Lipman, 2011; Saltman, 2012). This re-engineering of the commonwealth, as it is argued, renders the normalization of education as strictly a private right serving the welfare of the educated individual, the company, and the economy (Ravitch, 2013; Saltman 2012). Though free market reform advocates propose the need for new kinds of learning spaces and opportunities for those let down by traditional public schools, there is something more ominous about shifting long-held democratic assumptions

about commonwealth education to “‘balkanizing’ schools into particular arrangements of family and community groups, with their own specific values and agreements” (Wilson, 2010, p. 650).

Pressing Questions Moving Forward

The phenomenon of public school privatization indeed elicits more questions than can be addressed within the scope of this commentary. Certainly, we have all heard of low-performing schools and failing school districts and how poorly these systems are functioning. Choice options like charter schools, however, are often touted as an equalizing panacea via the marriage between politicians and free market capitalists. My concern with this political matrimony is not just about the outright corporate management of social services like education, as well as others such as healthcare and housing, , but also what free market intervention means to democratic principles and processes. Mann’s vision for universal education, though far from perfect in its design and implementation, was based on the virtuous idea that communities should be responsible for every child of the state and district. Yet, in our present time, ethics of civic responsibility and engagement have been obfuscated by neoliberal ideology.

For me, the pressing questions moving forward become: Should government education, like other public domains, continue to be presented as a consumer-driven product for individual consumption *or* should education be something that community stakeholders strive to protect and improve in order to maintain a commitment to the common good? Integral to this query is whether or not we as everyday citizens will continue to resign ourselves to the erosion of civic discourse and egalitarianism for the sake of personal gratification, cost-effectiveness, and “choice” logic. My hope is that we will somehow sustain a shared democratic vision wherever we position ourselves along the politico-economic spectrum, now and for emerging generations of citizens to come.

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