

The Critiquing of Charters while the Elephant of Public Schools Is in the Room

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I accept Ken Howe's challenge to move beyond the role of a critical spectator and take stances on policy issues centrally relevant to schooling. Howe encourages us to step back from looking at the trees via the minutiae of empirical findings both for and against school choice. However, I wonder if Howe mistakes his perception of a forest for that of a commercial tree farm. That is, in searching for the larger picture, Howe's indictment of school choice seems to me to lead him to a myopic understanding of the problems with school choice and privatization. This myopia, I submit, prevents Howe from criticizing the elephant in the room, public schools, on the very same grounds he indicts charter schools.

I wish to stipulate from the outset that I am no friend of the Cato Institute, Fordham Foundation, or American Enterprise Institute. Mine is not a defense of neo-classical economics and privatization. It is precisely this point, however, that I wish to exploit for the sake of argument. Specifically, I want to assert that public schools are already privatized spheres and that calls for democracy and social justice should be equally directed at charter schools *and* public schools. The distinction between the public and private in education seems more ideological than material. That is, while evidence indicates that public schools pursue private economic interests as aggressively as private entities, the commonly-held belief that they serve a public good allows private economic interests of a few to masquerade as the public interests of all.

Schools in general suffer from discourse mired in neo-classical economics because "production" and "provision" are commodified such that the evaluative criteria for judging schools in the first place are restricted to measurement standards that favor neo-classical analyses and thus business rationales. Teaching and learning, as a result, tend to be reduced to processes of production and provision that must meet market goals of transfer efficiency and quality control. Such evaluations *necessarily* favor business interests and privatization efforts because the form of the measurements for learning ("standardized," "scientific," "objective"), are the same measurements used on durable goods and "hard" services. When teaching and learning are reduced to the techniques and procedures that embrace market logics of this kind, they no longer qualify as teaching and learning.¹ They become production-line oriented processes of transmitted data, retainable by some students, but typically those students whose cultural capital is already valued in a consumerist, individualist, commodified classroom. Are we not faced with the strange reality that what we call public schools are actually and already venues for future private capital production? Where in public schools are students encouraged to question the idea of schooling itself that is not caught up in the bait-and-switch of neo-classical, reductionist thinking? Privatization advocates consider "public" schools "govern-

ment” schools and therefore are seen as a monopoly to destroy. But the neo-classical, reductionist, accountancy-oriented, preparation-for-the-“real world” ideology is not only already in evidence in “public” schools, it is their *modus operandi*.

Public schools operate under state constitutional guidelines which place legislatures in control of expenditures. School boards on both the state and local level interpret policy established by departments of education and the legislature. Given that legislatures are inordinately pro-business and neo-classical in their thinking, the policies they sanction are only a logical extension of that kind of thinking. Consider the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC).² ALEC has a staff of 30, boasts 2400 national memberships of state legislators from both parties, has more than 300 private-sector members (including ExxonMobil, Pfizer, Wal-Mart, and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco), and a 5.5 million dollar yearly budget to push “decidedly pro-business bills through state legislatures.”³ Given the connection between ALEC, legislators, and private business and given that legislators are responsible for school funding and school policy, is it possible that schools can be anything other than *already* privatized spheres? If they are not fully privatized, they are at least subsumed under neo-classical ideology and take many of their cues from it.

When we traditionally talk about privatization and school choice we usually distinguish between a few forms of private schools in order to clarify how the larger neo-classical privatization effort includes shifting public funds to private entities. Charter schools are an example of creeping privatization, even though they are ostensibly funded and established from the public rather than private sector. Charter schools are usually “legally autonomous publicly-funded schools operating under explicit contracts with local school boards,”⁴ but there has been some confusion about including charter schools in discussions and considerations of the privatization movement. I am unsure why the confusion exists. Charter schools and magnet schools are often an extension of the same push for free market, for-profit competition that typical privatization arguments make.⁵ On this point, Howe and I agree. In my view, Howe’s arguments against school choice, charters, and the general approach to privatizing public schools miss a larger point.

Take, for example, the issues surrounding the public versus private debate and consider the objections Howe raised: privatization diverts money from public schools to private, parochial, or charter schools and therefore public accountability is reduced and limited; privatization increases segregation and reinforces socio-economic disparities; privatization abolishes the separation between church and state, effectively having the government endorse one religion over another; and, in the case of tax credits and tax deductions that mandate the families pay tuition prior to reimbursement on their next tax return, privatization efforts significantly help wealthy families more than poor families.

The problem I wish to raise is whether any of these objections to privatization are unique to privatized or public charter spheres. Are not public schools, as they currently exist and operate, guilty of the same charges? While diversions of money may not be easily tied to openness of accountability, public schools are nonetheless guilty of being bastions of hierarchy and exclusivity (for example, tracking and

socio-economic distinctions of neighborhoods and districts). Since they have been managed by “school leaders” who take their cue from industry and business, we should not be surprised that public schools are not the citadels of social justice, democracy, or the free exchange of ideas Howe and I might otherwise wish them to be.⁶ Indeed, as with the example of ALEC before, the “ready-made” bills used by legislators to advance a neo-classical, conservative agenda are written and revised in private long before any public comment might come about.⁷

But public schools are also guilty of stratification, tracking, (de facto) segregation, and the like. Since most public school teachers and their boards are self-described Christians and work ethic rules structure the codes of conduct along with the explicit as well as hidden curricula, the issue of assumed truths and values comes to the fore.⁸ The line between separating church and state is consistently blurred (for example, school prayer becomes a “moment of silence”), arguably in the same way that distinctions between education and indoctrination are often blurred.⁹ When standardized curricula and their teacher’s manuals achieve biblical status it means that questioning, interpretation, and criticality are subsumed under dogma and tradition — *in public schools*. Privatization may often sound like a way to break free of such impositions and restraints, but experience and Howe’s data tell us otherwise. Fine as far it goes, my concern is that it does not go far enough to include the elephant, or sacred cow, in the middle of the room: already privatized “public” schools.

1. See Larry Cuban, *The Blackboard and the Bottom Line: Why Schools Can't Be Businesses* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

2. See <http://www.alec.org>.

3. Sonji Jacobs, “Council Drafts Laws that Business Likes,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, sec. A1, A12, August 8, 2005.

4. Charles J. Russo, Rosetta F. Sandidge, Robert Shapiro, and J. John Harris, III, “Legal Issues in Contracting Out for Public Education Services,” *Education and Urban Society* 27, no. 2 (1995): 128.

5. Just as one example, Georgia State Representative Jill Chambers came back to Atlanta during the August 6, 2005, weekend with a “ready-made” bill in hand from the American Legislative Exchange Council that would create “virtual charter schools” in the state. See Jacobs, “Council Drafts Laws that Business Likes.”

6. See Raymond Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). See especially chap. 9.

7. Jacobs, “Council Drafts Laws that Business Likes.”

8. National Center for Educational Statistics, *Schools and Staffing Survey, 1999-2000: Overview of the Data for Public, Private, Public Charter, and Bureau of Indian Affairs Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000). For historical consideration, see Max Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1958); Theodore Brameld, *Ends and Means in Education: A Midcentury Appraisal* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1950); and Richard Henry Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Company, 1926).

9. See Deron Boyles, “Would You Like Values with That?: Chick-Fil-A and Character Education,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* (2005): 45–62.