

Privatization of education in the United States

making life safe for the billionaire class

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The extreme example of privatization in the United States is New Orleans, where only four public schools now exist. All others are Charter schools. This is what the Trump regime intends to create throughout the United States. The failures for children in New Orleans will be duplicated if Trump and his Education Secretary Betty DeVos are successful.

Charter schools are essentially state-funded private schools, but without accountability to the public funders.

School vouchers are another form of state-funded privatization in the USA. The vouchers are payments by the state to any school chosen by the parents, even

those run as religious schools. Both systems are aimed at destroying the public schools.

Voucher proposals had been around for decades before there was much take up in the U.S. They grew out of a proposal by Milton Friedman from the University of Chicago School of Economics in his 1962 book, *Capitalism and Freedom*. Friedman argued that competition between schools in a market will produce better education. In fact, a major result has been more inequality in society and more opportunities for corruption.

The first national application of vouchers took place in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship. Naomi Klein points to this as an example of the “shock doctrine,” where a crisis or disaster is manipulated to impose policies that serve capital rather than social interests. The voucher system heightened inequalities in Chilean education. Even now, unequal education is a source of

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1. Charter schools are private institutions financed with public funds, with their own operating norms and autonomous in the hiring of personnel and setting standards.



“No charter school in Puerto Rico” Photo: Indymedia Puerto Rico

ongoing conflict as Chilean student movements have struggled for equity in education at all levels, from elementary to university.

Increased inequality has been a result in New Orleans, as well. The shock there was Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the city in 2005. Authorities took advantage of the destruction to break up New Orleans’s public school system, replacing it with Charters. This also enabled them to fire the unionized teachers, the majority of whom were female African-American teachers, only some of whom were rehired when they had to reapply for their jobs.

Mia Rotondo, a New Orleans teacher who has worked in both Charter schools and now one of the remaining public schools, was interviewed at the Free Minds, Free People conference in July of 2017.

Rotondo confirmed that she has seen increases in inequality resulting from the domination of Charters—separation by economic status as well as by race. She said that some of the people with long term experience teaching in New Orleans say that racial separation in education is now greater than in the days of legal segregation.

The school as a community has been destroyed, as

parents must enter their top ten choices on a smart phone app and students may end up anywhere in the city. Siblings may attend different schools and commuting across the city is common. Transportation is one of the major budget items. This break between schools and community means that parent involvement lags and after school activities disappear. Advertising and marketing becomes central to ensuring that the Charter gets students, some even hire billboards to build recognition.

Selective enrolment is used by some of the Charters. A Huffington Post story pointed out that “One select New Orleans charter school, Lusher, reported that its student body was 53% white, 21% economically disadvantaged and 4% special education in comparison to the overall system which is 7% white, 85% economically disadvantaged and 11% special education.”

The NAACP, an African-American advocacy organization, held a hearing in New Orleans in April of 2017 that displayed many of the problems of Charters. The organization has called for a moratorium on Charter schools until problems with accountability and transparency are addressed.



“Teachers from Chicago point out the importance of public education in the USA”.

Photo: AP-La Jornada

The school as community is also weakened by replacement of long-term, unionized African-American teachers with primarily white short-termers from the NGO Teach for America and other certification alternatives that do not require teacher education. The annual teacher turnover in many Charters is as high as 50%. With no union support and yearly contracts, teachers are particularly vulnerable to whims of administration or job loss because standardized test scores have not risen. Limited experience often means a lack of critical perspective on the larger issues, Rotondo noted.

Getting rid of teacher unions is one of the motivations for Charters and vouchers. The two U.S. national teacher unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), are among the few unions that still represent a significant share of workers in any segment of an occupation in the U.S..

In a growing number of states, teachers are excluded from entering into collective bargaining. This makes it more difficult to attract teachers to join the union when it has little power to protect them from arbitrary and unfair decisions--or bargain for salaries. Increasing the number of Charter schools adds another tool to weaken the unions and labour rights of teachers and other education employees.

The approach of the AFT is to try to unionize Charter school teachers. However, negotiating contracts one school at a time is expensive and lacks the critical mass often required to achieve a positive result from bargaining.

The NEA at its July 2017 meeting said: “As educators we believe that ‘public education is the cornerstone of our social, economic, and political structure’.” They joined the NAACP in calling for a moratorium on more Charter schools until they can be held publicly accountable.

The opponents of Charters face a formidable challenge. The Trump regime is pushing Charters and vouchers because of the political space already created by billionaires wanting to destroy public education and the critical perspectives that a quality public education produces. The New Education Secretary Betsy DeVos is only one of the billionaires trying to wreak havoc on public schools. The Koch brothers, influential oil tycoons, have put multi-millions into campaigns for Charters and in training future education leaders. Microsoft magnate Bill Gates put millions into campaigns in Washington state aimed at creating a law that would allow Charters.

Ultimately, Charters and vouchers are aimed at destroying the institutions that represent the public interest and the 99%. They aim to ensure that the power of the 1% is not successfully challenged.

Unfortunately, the scandals surrounding president Trump and his online bad behavior are distracting attention away from the offensive to privatize education, which the U.S. has long considered a fundamental institution of democracy.