

We Rise to Resist

Voices from a New Era in Women's Political Action



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Goodnight Public Education

The Fight to Save Neighborhood Schools

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Since its inception in the United States, the public school system has been seen as a method of disciplining children in the interest of producing a properly subordinate adult population. Sometimes conscious of explicit, and at other times a natural emanation from the conditions of dominance and subordinacy prevalent in the economic sphere, the theme of social control pervades Education thought and policy.

—S. Bowles and H. Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*

We live in an America on the precipice of a values decision. Do we believe money, business, and the economy should drive our government? Or do we think people, community and equality should drive the government?

Those of us in the resistance likely fall in the latter category; I definitely do. But I am not so enlightened as to have understood the extent of this values brawl on November 9, 2016, the day after Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. It took Denver Public Schools (DPS) closing our son's public pre-school—6th grade Montessori to wake me up. It turns out public education today exemplifies the values struggle going on nationwide, and I had to resist.

About 20 years ago, several communities and education experts decided they wanted control over the schools in their neighborhoods and the freedom to introduce new education models. They brought forth a massive lobbying effort to start the charter school system. The idea was that parents should get to choose the schools their kids go to and that there should be choices in each neighborhood. For example, if your kid is particularly artistic, perhaps he or she would do better at an art oriented school.

However, because we live in a profit-motive, capitalism-rules culture, this idea was quickly corrupted in two directions. First, under the George W. Bush administration, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) bill that created our oppressive testing system and penalized the schools and teachers serving the most vulnerable students by withholding funds and linking teacher performance evaluations to test scores.

Second, seeing that there were problems with our educational system, billionaires like Bill Gates and the Koch brothers decided an economic approach to education would be worthwhile and threw money at the issue. This was the beginning of the contemporary educational reform movement.

Antonia Darder, quoting Alex Molnar in *Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America's Schools*,¹ said that "simultaneously with a depressed economy and worsening condition for workers, we find 'the rhetoric about the catastrophic failure of the American public schools [has] become even more feverish.'" She added that Reformers "offer a public-spirited justification for introducing education to the profit motive and giving educators a healthy dose of the 'real world' in the form of competition. Most important, they keep the focus on schools and off the failure of business to promote the well-being of most of the countries citizens."²

Thus, education reform was born, or begat. In order to make room for charter schools operated by corporations, education Reformers believe in closing public schools. Every year, many school districts target the bottom 5 percent of their schools for closure. For Reformers, business is everything, and so they run schools like businesses, and apply business language accordingly. DPS Superintendent Tom Boasberg actually brags about his "Portfolio Management" system, like a CEO bragging about his franchises.

Autonomy is a key component of the Reform ideology, making each school its own competitive product. Under this model, schools must lobby for building space, air conditioners, new books, etc. In order to maintain enrollments and resources they have to develop their own partnerships with outside organizations to meet the needs of their communities, and then market themselves.

Autonomy does give principals the leeway to lead as they see fit, and schools with well-connected principals who network well and have a strong supporting parent organization do thrive. But, schools with new principals who've come from outside the school's community, who are not adept at networking, and/or are not connected to a city's non-profit world are left floundering with no support from the district. For example, Gilpin Montessori Pre-school was in a prime location, on a beautiful historic campus and in gentrifying neighborhood. The school had been targeted for closure for about 6 years, but it wasn't until the district was able to bring in a new inexperienced principal with no connections to the city and little ability to network that they were able to justify closing the school.

In Denver, as in many districts, autonomous principals are also allowed to conduct Reduction in Building Staff (RIBS).³ In Denver, this policy is frequently invoked to fire a teacher without cause, i.e., to eliminate a teacher a principal doesn't like.

As reported in a research paper by the Grattan Institute 2013, autonomy grants school leaders the authority to decide how their schools operate. But they are no better at implementing high-quality systems of teacher development, appraisal and feedback, and other policies than are centralized schools. "School leaders should be empowered to run their schools well. But empowerment means much more than autonomy."⁴

Reformers also value accountability and, in order to simplify education success, they pray at the altar of standardized tests. Parents, students and teachers have been decrying testing pretty much since NCLB passed. Its negative effects include teaching to the test, as opposed to teaching students to think; penalizing teachers in high-needs schools by linking their performance reviews to the test scores; and using erroneous, lacking and often lagging data to close schools.

William J. Mathis, managing director of the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado Boulder, puts it this way:

Measuremyopia is characterized by a fixation on indicators that are easily quantifiable and reliable. For traditional economics, that indicator is money. For schools, this leads researchers (of many

persuasions) to standardized test scores.... Fundamentally, the problem is that none of the variables are particularly good indicators of what they are supposed to measure. For example, test scores are only a small part of schools and seniority [are] not a good measure of teacher quality. Further, the basic model assumes that the world is linear, relationships remain static, and that groups and individuals behave in predictable ways.... Cohesiveness, cooperation, altruism, caring and the common good are vital to a democratic society. But these are alien concepts to economists' visions of school reforms.⁵

Darder adds, "The singular indicator of test scores has achieved an overarching prominence, seriously limiting education debates.... Rather than entertaining questions regarding student abilities and overall performance, the current questions that dominate educational debates all loop back to the issue of testing and the improvement of test scores."⁶

In Denver, students can opt out of the standardized tests. However, if enough students choose this option, a school will drop lower on the district's School Performance Framework (SPF) and could be in danger of being closed. The SPF ratings are supposed to be based on the three previous years scores however, in Gilpin's case, one year's scores had been invalidated by the state due to a new (PARCC) test, but in order to push the process along the district counted that year as a 0 and failed the school. Consequently, Gilpin was slated for closure because of low test scores.

To "legitimize" a school closure, the district also requires a School Quality Review (SQR) conducted by a third-party contractor. The SQR was supposed to reflect the positive culture and otherwise immeasurable aspects of education. After the school board voted to close our school, we discovered through a Colorado Open Records Act (CORA) request of district emails that Gilpin passed the SQR, but the company that performed the review was asked to change the score so we would fail. At Gilpin, kids self-integrated. They took responsibly for their actions. They showed great character—and they were failed.

The reform values of autonomy and accountability are also used to justify the fundamental-ideology of Reformers: the closure of public schools to open corporate charter schools. This is the philosophy of Trump appointee Betsy DeVos, the new U.S. Secretary of Education. If schools fail standardized tests, principals and teachers can be blamed, since they were "autonomous," and public neighborhood schools can be closed and replaced with charter schools, DeVos believes. This is not a move to give local expert educators more room to experiment with new education models, as was the original intent of charter schools. Instead, it is a policy used to allow corporate charter companies to open more schools nationwide. DeVos and the Reformers are using charters to privatize education. This does not create the diversity of educational opportunities the district claims.

In Denver, there are four types of charters that serve specific demographics, or public schools, which have limited funds and must compete for building space and students. With limited funds, public schools are now forced to market themselves against charter schools that have separate corporate budgets for air conditioners, marketing and lobbying.

So, why do we care if schools are public or charter?

In an ideal world where teachers and students of all backgrounds are treated equitably and fairly, and community is sacred, we wouldn't. But the reality is that charter schools take public funds, but are not required to follow the regulations that public

schools do. All four of the corporate charters that have been approved to open more schools in Denver next year opted out of numerous district regulations without being required to, or providing a rationale. These “onerous” regulations include the Procedures for the Investigation of Public Complaints of Discrimination or Harassment, Procedures for the Investigation of Employee Complaints of Discrimination or Harassment, Regulation regarding the Public’s Right to Know—Freedom of Information, and school safety, to name just a few.⁷

The effect of freedom from accountability is that charter schools do not have to hire educated or licensed teachers, pay them even the low going rate, or serve all student types. And if the total number of licensed teachers falls below 50 percent, the district administration doesn’t have to negotiate with the teacher’s union. Thus, a charter school—first district is union busting one of the few, and biggest unions, for women. Let’s be clear: women are expected to take nurturing jobs, accept being underpaid, and roll over when we are undercut by profiteering. The net effect of these regulations is to institutionalize racism and sexism, while the charter school’s corporate owners make a profit off the public funds.

Building on the idea that charter schools offer parents a choice of quality schools—the free-market applied to education—Secretary DeVos, along with Reformers all around the country, have been talking about school choice as the cure to all of our education woes. However, the Civil Rights Project analyzed 40 states, the District of Columbia, and several dozen metropolitan areas with large enrollments of charter school students and found that, “charter schools are more racially isolated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the nation.”⁸

This matters in terms of policy and rhetoric because, according to DeVos, who was backed by Republicans and Democrats on this, *school choice* was one of the solutions to the school segregation problem. However, in a collaborative study between Penn State University and University of Texas at El Paso, Stephen Kotok, Erica Frankenberg, Kai A. Schafft, Bryan A. Mann, Edward J. Fuller found that “on average, the transfers of African American and Latino students from traditional public schools to charter schools were segregationist. White students transferring within urban areas transferred to more racially segregated schools. Students from all three racial groups attended urban charters with lower poverty concentration.”⁹ In another study, published in *Education Finance and Policy* by Richard O. Welsh from the University of Georgia, Matthew Duque from the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, and Andrew McEachin from the Rand Institute found that “high-achieving students switch to high-quality schools whereas low-achieving students transfer to low-quality schools.”¹⁰

Here’s what *school choice* looks like in our historically black Denver neighborhood somewhat divided regarding gentrification. There are four elementary school choices open to everyone:

1. A highly reputable exemplary charter school housed in a downtown building with no outdoor playground and a waiting list. This school primarily attracts educated, middle+ class white families.
2. A school that has been targeted by DPS for closure for about six years now. It is mid-level on the SPF and is co-located with a corporate charter focusing on STEM (Science, Engineering, Science and Math).
3. A corporate charter that targets black families and whose approach is strict

discipline, including lines on the hallway floors that students must follow with their hands stuck tightly to their bodies. It is nicknamed "Jail Prep."

4. A public neighborhood elementary that still uses a zero-tolerance approach to discipline, despite the fact that the policy has been proven to disproportionately penalize black male students; and where the kids in the Federal Head Start program are separated out. The net effect is that middle class white students are, from a young age, taught that they are better than their counterparts, and no one is taught conflict resolution. This is the only public pre-school in the neighborhood.

Reformers would argue that we could go anywhere in the city. But, as stated above, it doesn't happen. Many parents in our neighborhood cannot get their kids to a school across town, and the rest of us have the apparently erroneous belief that our kids ought to be able to go to school in the neighborhood we choose to live in.

Students that ride Denver's so called innovative "Success Express" (I suspect called innovative because it makes business sense, not because it's effective at getting kids to schools) often have to ride for an hour or longer to go even a few miles to a school outside their neighborhoods. This might make sense for a high schooler, but it is too much to ask of students in the lower elementary grades. Preschoolers are not offered transportation at all. Then, of course, there is the issue of the "good schools" having wait lists, which is why many more affluent families chose to buy homes in the "good neighborhoods," further segregating and disempowering low-income communities.

Elaine Simon, co-director of the urban studies program at the University of Pennsylvania, points out that closing neighborhood schools harms neighborhoods. She wrote, "Schools are often the one institution still surviving in low-income neighborhoods, and they serve as a point of pride and community for families. Nonetheless, the new 'education Reformers' prioritize closing schools over improving them, using the argument that we are in a time of public sector austerity, which means a need to orient to market forces."¹¹ In other words, Reformers believe we should be orienting to money rather than communities. This is how racism continues to be institutionalized.

School choice is not about parents having a plethora of good schools to choose from that meet their needs. It's about a school district deciding what companies it wants to run its schools, and keeping disenfranchised people from having a strong community center to hold them together and build power around.

When it came to closing Gilpin Montessori, DPS claims to have included the community in the discussion. However, the meetings were held at the school where only a few parents came and no one from the outside neighborhood was invited. None of the community leaders or registered neighborhood organizations were informed of the situation or the meetings. And the meetings themselves consisted of power point presentations of what the district was going to do. There was no discussion, no listening to the community, and no real community involvement in the decision.

Those of us who resisted brought the issue to our neighbors, we informed the Registered Neighborhood Organizations, the NAACP, local neighborhood leaders, and the media. We even walked around the neighborhood handing out fliers and talking to people whose families had gone to the school for generations. And, when we discovered the changes SQR score, we brought to it the school board; they didn't bat an eye. The unfortunate reality is that the Reform ideology that Denver public schools, and other districts nationwide, have adopted has failed women, people of color and low-income families.

The public good, by definition, needs to exist separate from the free-market. If we value the education of all people, the strengthening and integration of communities, and leveling of the playing field, we cannot let the Reformer's free-market approach to education stand. If we value democracy, the voices of all the people, then we must educate and empower all the children equally. Here in Denver we have a vision of community schools, supported by a district that shares our values of equality, empowerment, community, and quality education for all. We embrace restorative justice polices, social justice curriculums, diverse and integrated schools.

We are fighting back by organizing our communities in a grassroots, boots on the ground, door-to-door effort to run pro-community school candidates in this November's school board election. The core value driving this campaign is that every neighborhood deserves a great public school and a place for communities to come together.

DPS is fighting back by denying 18-year-old school board candidate Auontai (Tay) Anderson access to the facilities his competitor has been allowed to use. His competitors attack his age and background, but he grew up in the schools they want to close, the community they are disempowering. His competitors are funded by the Gates Foundation and the Koch Brothers. The fight is not easy, but we persist.

In Michigan, the Detroit Public Schools Community District filed a lawsuit against the Michigan School Reform Office over their decision to close 16 schools.¹² The district has been told they are not allowed to use school funds in the lawsuit.¹³ The fight is not easy, but we persist.

If we want a society that values women and people of color, we must teach these values to our children. We must take control of our public education system away from the capitalists who use it to control us and keep us down. We must have a vision of what good government looks like, what good public education based on elevating rather than controlling and subordinating looks like. Then we must oust the politicians who have been or are being paid for by mil/billionaires. And we must not let them represent us in D.C. The fight is not easy, but we persist.

We must show up at school district meetings, even if it's not about our kids' school, even if we don't have kids. We must get our neighbors to vote in school board elections. We must educate our networks on the issues with Reform and the risks of privatizing this imperative public good. We must remember, and then remind, our communities that our power comes from our schools, that having a working democratic government requires a well-educated populous, and that we cannot have this if mil/billionaires continue to deprive women, low-income families, and people of color their rights to quality and equal education. The fight is not easy, but we persist.

NOTES

1. Gustavo E. Fischman (Editor, Contributor), Peter McLaren (Editor), Heinz Sünker (Editor), Colin Lankshear (Editor, Contributor), Mike Cole (Contributor), Antonia Darder (Contributor), Ramin Farahmandpur (Contributor), Robert Fitzsimmons (Contributor), Bernardo Gallegos (Contributor), Henry Giroux (Contributor), David Theo Goldberg (Contributor), Rhonda Hammer (Contributor), Dave Hill (Contributor), Donna Houston (Contributor), Douglas Kellner (Contributor), Michele J. Knobel (Contributor), Peter Mayo (Contributor), Michael A. Peters (Contributor), Ludwig Pongratz (Contributor), Laura Pulido (Contributor), Erika Richter (Contributor), Albert Scherr (Contributor), Juha Suoranta (Contributor), Tuukka Tomperi (Contributor) et al., *Critical Theories, Radical Pedagogies, and Global Conflicts* (Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

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6. Fischman et. al., *Ibid*.
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