

Free-Market Think Tanks and the Marketing of Education Policy

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"For about two years now, President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have been co-opting much of the GOP playbook on education. They support charter schools. They endorse merit pay. They decry teacher tenure and seniority. On alternating Thursdays, they bracingly challenge the teachers' unions." So begins a December 2010 article in *National Review Online*, authored by Frederick M. Hess of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and Michael Petrilli of the Fordham Institute. Later in the article, Duncan receives praise from these conservative pundits for embracing spending limitations on American schools and welcoming—in place of those resources—"productivity" increases.

The Duncan-Obama approach should sound familiar, even to those who do not follow education policy discussions. Defund, deregulate, de-unionize, and shift to the private sector. Reallocate policy-making authority from democratic institutions to a wealthy oligarchy. Corporate-endowed think tanks like AEI have been successfully promoting this road map for everything else, so why not education?

But education is different in one disquieting way: many self-identified progressives have climbed on board the bandwagon. Some, in fact, are driving. Although the economic analyses offered by groups like the Brookings Institution and the Center for American Progress generally explore how to soften the sharp edges of market capitalism, their respective education divisions are busily promoting free-market policies in our children's schools. Arianna Huffington warns against deregulation of the financial sector,

but she's all for it in the educational sector. Nicholas Kristof worries about a "hedge fund republic," but joins in the hedge-fund managers' campaign to criticize teacher-union contracts. Jonathan Alter of *Newsweek* sees dangers in unregulated markets yet pushes for more markets in education. As anyone who has watched *Waiting for Superman* can attest, Alter is particularly hostile toward teachers' unions. Director Davis Guggenheim is another example: a hero of the Left for *An Inconvenient Truth*, but a hero of the Right for *Superman*. Media stars such as John Legend and Oprah Winfrey have also joined in, as have (to some extent) venerable civil rights organizations such as the United Negro College Fund and the National Council of La Raza.

The most engaged in this neoliberal education campaign are organizations focused on school choice: Democrats for Education Reform (and their 501(c)(4), Education Reform Now Advocacy), Education Sector, and the Progressive Policy Institute; as well as service-oriented groups like New Leaders for New Schools, the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) and Green Dot charter networks, Teach for America, The New Teacher Project, Stand for Children, the New Schools Venture Fund, and even the leadership of the Harlem Children's Zone.

These groups, it should be stressed, are very careful to avoid being characterized as politically on the Right or affiliated with Republican political efforts. Their collaborators, however, do not show any such reluctance. Right-wing, free-market think tanks have joined with neoliberal education groups in pushing for choice and privatization policies. These right-wing think tanks and similar organizations are active in every state, and many more are pursuing a national

agenda. Together, these groups have launched a potent attack on the progressive foundations of American schooling, and they are framing this attack as a “civil rights struggle.”

After years of hammering home the theme of “failing public schools,” the campaign is now increasingly focused on teachers’ unions and the existing system of teacher education, preparation, and certification. Deregulation is consistently put forward as the best way to address unmet needs. Additional attacks are leveled at legal and political efforts toward an equitable distribution of educational resources and at democratically elected school boards and neighborhood schooling. Offered in their place are school choice, mayoral control, and free-market entrepreneurialism. Under the new model, accountability and sound policy making are found not in traditional democratic structures but in a fundamentalist view of the power of the market as exerted through parental choice. Efficiency and quality are to be achieved through choice combined with publicized test scores.

By any measure, the free-market campaign in education has shown extraordinary results. Conservative education policy is now pervasive and deeply ingrained among a growing faction of powerful and wealthy Democrats. As suggested by the opening quotation from Hess and Petrilli, education has emerged as a key potential area of accord between the White House and the Republican-led House. Only minimal compromise will be necessary because the two sets of positions are already so well-aligned.

Of course, most people and organizations on the Left are justifiably disgusted by the lack of progress the nation has made toward providing equitable educational opportunities for children of color and those living in poverty. And when confronted with repeated disappointments, it is not surprising that many people are willing to grab onto attractive-sounding alternatives. Small wonder that some progressives find themselves drawn to an organization such as the Black Alliance for Educational Options. BAEO was started in 2000 with funding from the Walton Family Foundation and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation—two philanthropies that have offered enormous support

for school choice as well as support for a broad portfolio of anti-union, deregulation, and privatization endeavors. What BAEO and similar organizations do is help to make the public face of school choice more attractive to progressives than the movement of decades ago, which was dominated by transparently anti-public-school activists.

This points to what should be the fundamental progressive response—the critique that many progressives seem hesitant to seize: that educational opportunities should be among the most precious public goods. While public education does provide an important private benefit to children and their families, it also lies at the center of our societal well-being. Educational opportunities should therefore never be distributed by market forces, because markets exist to create inequalities—they thrive by creating “winners” and “losers.” These forces are already at play in the housing market, and school reform should attenuate the resulting inequities, not exacerbate them, as we see happening with unconstrained school choice.

Reformers appeal to the urgency of confronting “failing schools,” but the logic of their argument leads inevitably to students’ dependence upon parents who know how to maneuver within the system to gain private advantage. This is an abandonment of the goal of a comprehensive public sector that provides equitable, universal opportunities. Such consequences are anathema to progressives when free-market ideas are applied to health care; there is no reason they should be welcome when applied to the education of the nation’s children.

The shift to the current focus on deregulation and free-market solutions was not a mere happenstance. A great deal of time, money, and effort orchestrated the shift in a very purposeful, calculated way. As an example, consider the case of Linda Darling-Hammond.

During his presidential campaign, candidate Obama assembled what he called a “team of rivals” (evoking Abraham Lincoln) for his education advisers. The team was primarily composed of neoliberals, but among those leading the team was someone with a

progressive perspective—Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond. She is widely recognized as one of the most accomplished and respected scholars in the field, and teacher preparation and teacher quality are her particular areas of expertise.

Immediately after the election, Obama announced that Darling-Hammond would head his transition team for education, and speculation was strong that she was the front-runner to become secretary of education. What followed in November and December of 2008 were repeated condemnations of Darling-Hammond—in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and the *New Republic*, among others—with the unremitting charge that she was a defender of the status quo and an enemy of reform. David Brooks’s negative assessment, he wrote, was preceded by “a flurry of phone calls from reform leaders nervous that Obama was about to side against them” by choosing Darling-Hammond as education secretary. Her primary crime, in their view, was the publication of a research article in 2005 titled “Does Teacher Preparation Matter?” which was skeptical of dazzling claims made by and about Teach for America. In the end, the media and political campaign against Darling-Hammond was both ferocious and successful.

In part, the success of the campaign reflects the rise of private advocacy think tanks, whose “research” has helped legitimate the conservative educational agenda. I have learned a lot since I helped to start the Think Tank Review Project (thinktankreview.org) five years ago. The project—now called Think Twice—applies academic peer review standards to reports from think tanks and then publishes reviews on the project website. Think tank reports have become widely influential for policymakers and the media. Their influence is due not to the superiority of their research but rather to the think tanks’ proficiency at packaging and marketing their publications—many of which are of very weak quality. We have found that these advocacy reports have often attained greater prominence than the most rigorously reviewed articles addressing the same issues published in the

most respected research journals. This should be a matter of concern. If all documents labeled “research” are indiscriminately received and reported as of equal worth, without review or critique by independent experts, their value is obviously not dependent on quality or rigor. These attributes are beside the point. Value is instead tightly linked to the ability of the researchers to gain attention and influence policy. Private think tanks, which produce their own in-house, non-refereed research, accordingly become sensible investments for individuals and groups hoping to advance their agendas.

In January of each year, the Think Twice project hands out its Bunkum Awards, highlighting nonsensical, confusing, and disingenuous education think tank reports from the past year. Only those reports judged to have most egregiously undermined informed discussion and sound policymaking are recognized. Past winners include the “Time Machine Award” given to a report from the Reason Foundation. In a truly breathtaking innovation, the report attributed positive reform outcomes to policy changes that had not been made yet. Another winner was the Manhattan Institute, which received the “Who Reads Warning Labels? Award” for its report arguing that teachers are better paid than most white-collar professionals. The study used hourly earnings data to support its contentions. But, our reviewer noted, “This approach is fundamentally flawed because the [data set’s] calculation of weeks and hours worked is very different for teachers and other professionals. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics—which publishes the [data set]—has explicitly warned its users not to use hourly rates of pay in this exact same context.”

An attack on preschool policies by the Hoover Institution won the “Misdirection” Award for its courageous effort to keep policy makers from noticing approaches that actually work to help children. Rather than acknowledging a mountain of empirical, peer-reviewed, and widely accepted evidence, the Hoover author cherry-picks a few weak studies to criticize proposals for universal preschool. Our reviewer summed up this work as “errors, exaggerations, misrepresentation, and logical inconsistency.” Among the

reviewer's catalog of fourteen major errors, he notes that actual costs are exaggerated by a factor of two while immediate and long-term well-documented effects are underreported or not reported accurately.

This tactic—the selective use of earlier research to bolster what appear to be pre-determined findings—is one we have seen repeatedly. Other harmful patterns and practices that are pervasive in the publications of advocacy think tanks include methodological weaknesses, such as failure to account for selection bias or the confusion of correlation and causation, failure to provide the data on which the report's findings are based, overstated conclusions, and unsupported recommendations based on improbable inferential leaps.

Just this January, we published a review by economist Jesse Rothstein of the University of California, Berkeley, who examined a December 2010 report from the Gates Foundation. The report had been trumpeted in newspapers and other media outlets across the country as proof of the validity and usefulness of value-added models, which are used to estimate students' likely achievement in a given year. The report used student test scores to gauge teacher effectiveness—a confirmation of a policy supported by the foundation. But Rothstein found that the study's own data “undermine rather than validate value-added based approaches to teacher evaluation.” As presented in the Gates report, the study purportedly showed that teachers whose students show gains on the state test also produce gains on a separate test of deeper conceptual understanding, administered by the researchers. Rothstein's review, however, explained that these correlations are very weak—that over 40 percent of those teachers whose students' state exam scores place them in the bottom quarter of effectiveness are in the top half on the alternative assessment.

In report after report from market-oriented organizations, privatization reforms in particular have been offered as the pre-ordained solution for any number of educational problems, from school funding to high school dropout rates to the weaknesses of the No Child Left Behind law. Indeed, a person reading these reports could not fail to

conclude that the public nature of public education is the root cause of all that ails schools—everything else is a symptom.

Just a few decades ago, the Think Twice project would have had much less work to do. Public policy think tanks began fairly modestly with the founding of such institutions as the Brookings Institution (1927), the American Enterprise Institute (1943), and the Hoover Institution (1959). In the 1970s, a number of influential think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation (1973) and the Cato Institute (1977) were founded, and since the 1970s the number of think tanks has increased dramatically. The most active and powerful tend to be free-market think tanks like those mentioned above. To date, the Think Twice project has published more than eighty reviews, and they highlight a well-financed, tightly interconnected group of policy actors working within a growing alliance of free-market organizations.

In addition to national organizations, a very visible and influential network of state-level free-market think tanks has been built, including the Pioneer Institute in Massachusetts, the Mackinac Center in Michigan, the Buckeye Institute in Ohio, and the Commonwealth Foundation in Pennsylvania. They have induced major shifts in the nature of policy discussions. While university-based scholars produce the most research, publications of private think tanks are disproportionately represented in the reporting of major national newspapers. Market-oriented think tanks in particular have proliferated, buoyed by very large gifts from a relatively small number of benefactors. For instance, between 1985 and 2000, three staunchly right-wing funders—the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Sarah Scaife Foundation (controlled by billionaire newspaper publisher Richard Mellon Scaife), and the John M. Olin Foundation—awarded grants of more than \$100 million to just fifteen market-oriented think tanks. Further funding was provided by these foundations to other think tanks, and additional funders have also supported the network.

With funding from right-wing donors, market-oriented think tanks have been able to

engage in aggressive outreach to media and policy makers to promote their favored ideas. Conservative donors have demonstrated a greater willingness than progressives to spend their money on developing and supporting institutions that adhere to their ideological premises—and to fund activities that directly engage with the political process. By contrast, most non-conservative grantmakers tend to support community-based projects that address urgent needs and to shy away from politics. Further, few progressive foundations are willing to fund the operating expenses of institutions with strong communication strategies and clear public policy goals. It is not surprising, then, that institutions funded by conservatives produce a much greater level of activity aimed directly at influencing policy, such as the publication of research reports, briefing documents, legislative analyses, and commentaries, as well as networking and briefings for policy makers and reporters.

The pattern, seen cumulatively over the past several decades, is that the Right has focused tremendous resources on marketing its ideas and building networks of powerful allies that will push those ideas; the Left has not. As a result, the messages promoted by conservative think tanks have influenced even progressives who otherwise bring to bear a healthy skepticism regarding market-based proposals for solving problems of social inequality.

Changing this dynamic requires finding a way to limit the sway of power and money over school reform. Redressing the imbalance between the influence of vulnerable communities impacted by school reform and that of billionaires convinced that they know what is best for those communities demands learning from the methods of the Scaifes, Olins, and others. Just as there are no quick fixes to the crises—educational and otherwise—facing America's low-income communities of color, there are no quick fixes to these participatory and political inequalities. To bring voices from vulnerable communities to the fore will require new networks of progressive educators, families, organizers, researchers, advocates, and policy makers as well as benefactors willing to invest heavily and for the long term in research, implementation, and communication—to engage with the politics as well as the substance of education.

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Welcome Aboard

We are very happy to welcome two new members of the *Dissent* editorial board.

Mark Engler, who blogs regularly for *Dissent* and has written frequently for the print edition, is freelance journalist and a senior analyst with Foreign Policy in Focus. He is the author of *How to Rule the World: The Coming Battle Over the Global Economy*, a monthly columnist for the Oxford, UK-based *New Internationalist* magazine, and a regular contributor to a variety of progressive magazines. He has lived in Guatemala and El Salvador and has reported from throughout much of Latin America.

Gary Gerstle is a historian of the twentieth-century United States, a professor at Vanderbilt University, and the author, co-author, or co-editor of six books. His *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* won the 2001 Solutos Prize for outstanding work in immigration and ethnic history. He is at work on an interpretive history of national and state government power in the United States from the time of the Revolution until the present and has written several times for *Dissent*.