

Trump's voucher plan and the right-wing campaign to destroy public education

Part two

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This is the second of a two-part series on the assault on public education in the United States. Part one can be read [here](#).

Billionaires set the education agenda

Billionaires and their foundations see opportunities to increase their wealth through school privatization. They've gotten a lot of experience already with setting up charter schools, many of which accept vouchers. For example, the New Markets Tax Credit that was initiated by President Bill Clinton in the late 1990s combines "the private sector and the federal government—to bring economic and community development to low-income communities" (Treasury Department).

The tax credit gives hedge fund managers and wealthy investors opportunities to make money from charter schools. They get a 39 percent tax credit that more than doubles the returns on these investments in about seven years.

David Brain, head of the real estate investment firm Entertainment Properties Trust, appearing on CNBC in 2012, said charter schools are "probably the most profitable sector in real estate investment. ... I think it's a very stable business, very recession-resistant. It's a very high-demand product."

That's not how school reformers described schools 87 years ago. What we today describe as public schools began in the 1830s as the Common School movement. The reformer Horace Mann proposed a system of free, universal and nonsectarian schools for all children, regardless of religion or social class. Students would gain knowledge, while learning how to be productive democratic citizens.

Today, the ruling class wants to indoctrinate students with free market propaganda. Kevin K. Kumashiro analyzed this agenda in an article for the journal of the American Association of University Professors in May-June 2012, titled, "When Billionaires Become Educational Experts: 'Venture philanthropists' push for the privatization of public education."

His article traces the influence of the business sector in education and how it has changed, noting, "In recent years a handful of millionaires and billionaires have come to exert influence over educational policy and practice like at no other time in American history."

"Venture philanthropists" seek to develop a layer of students who

embrace capitalism and conservative ideologies, produce research that makes conservative ideologies accessible and can take leading positions in government and advocacy organizations.

To do this, they had to destroy public education. As Kumashiro writes, "At the top of the chopping block was public education, considered by some to be a drain on the government and a crutch for society not only because it was the most expensive of domestic enterprises but also because it exemplified what they considered to be a socialist enterprise. Conservatives called for the entire school system to be privatized, made into a free enterprise, and the conservatives' strategy of choice was school vouchers."

The right-wing economist and free-market advocate Milton Friedman first proposed school vouchers to "denationalize" education more than half a century ago. He wrote, "Parents would then be free to spend this sum and any additional sum they themselves provided on purchasing educational services from an 'approved' institution of their own choice. ... The role of government would be limited to insuring that the schools met certain minimum standards, such as the inclusion of a minimum common content in their programs, much as it now inspects restaurants" (*Capitalism and Freedom*, 1962).

This appreciation of education delivered like fast food is promoted today by the top-giving venture philanthropies, which include the Broad Education Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, the Donald and Doris Fisher Fund, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation.

And they don't just sit on the sidelines. They participate actively in setting up the very structures to destroy public education. They have every level of government—federal, state and local—assisting them.

On January 23, 2017, a bill sponsored by the Republican congressman from Iowa, Steve King, was introduced to the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. While having little chance of passing now, the bill gives an idea of what the most rabid anti-public-school forces would like to see.

A summary the Choices in Education Act of 2017 on Congress.gov states:

"This bill repeals the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and limits the authority of the Department of Education (ED) such that ED is authorized only to award block grants to qualified states."

The bill sets up an education voucher program whereby the federal government funds block grants to states for distribution to parents who elect to enroll their child in any public or private elementary or

secondary school in the state or to home-school their child.

The role of the courts

Right-wing demagogues like Trump present the federal courts as a bastion of liberalism and routinely denounce the courts for “legislating from the bench.” In reality, the courts are a bastion of the capitalist state and follow the lead of the ruling class, in education as on every other issue. When public school advocates go to court to try to defend education, they find the courts rule to advance the privatization agenda. While there continue to be numerous lawsuits against voucher programs, the courts have ruled overwhelmingly to support them, as described in the examples below.

Ruling: There is no fundamental right to education guaranteed in the Constitution:

Texas: The Supreme Court made a significant decision related to education in 1972 in *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*. The San Antonio Independent School District in Texas was funded in part by local property taxes, as were many school districts. The District sued the state on behalf of its students, arguing that since property taxes were relatively low in the area, students at the public schools were being underserved compared to wealthier districts.

The district argued that the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment mandates equal funding among school districts. But the Court ultimately rejected their claim, ruling that there is no fundamental right to education guaranteed in the Constitution, and that the Equal Protection Clause doesn’t require exact “equality or precisely equal advantages” among school districts.

Ruling: Using state funds to pay for religious schools does not violate state or federal constitutions:

Wisconsin: The Wisconsin constitution requires the state to provide uniform and free district schools to all children and states that “no sectarian instruction shall be allowed therein.” In a case challenging Wisconsin’s voucher program, *Davis v. Grover*, 1992, the Wisconsin Supreme Court stated: “The legislature has fulfilled its constitutional duty to provide for the basic education of our children. Their experimental attempts to improve upon that foundation in no way denies any student the opportunity to receive the basic education in the public school system.”

Ohio: The US Supreme Court in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 2002, reviewed Ohio’s program to decide if it violated the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause prohibiting the government from making any law “respecting an establishment of religion.” More than 90 percent of the financial aid was going to parents with students in religious schools. The court’s ruling upheld Ohio’s voucher program in Cleveland.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Rehnquist wrote, “The Ohio program is entirely neutral with respect to religion. It provides benefits directly to a wide spectrum of individuals, defined only by financial need and residence in a particular school district. It permits such individuals to exercise genuine choice among options public and private, secular and religious. The program is therefore a program of true private choice.”

Nevada: Most private schools in Nevada are run by religious institutions and include religious curriculum. Nevada was the first state to pass a law allowing any parent to remove a child from public

school and take tax dollars with them to pay for private or parochial school. Nevada’s constitution does not allow public funds of any kind to be used for sectarian purposes.

However, Las Vegas District Court ruled in 2016 that the program did not violate the constitution: “The state has no influence or control over how any parent makes his or her genuine and independent choice” to spend that money, the judge wrote in his ruling. “Parents, and not the state, direct through their own independent decision the funds to religious education schools.”

Education is a social right

President Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos are making sure the elites can accomplish their goals for education. Trump has said that public schools “allow the progressives in the Department of Education to indoctrinate, not educate, our kids. What they are doing does not fit the American model of governance. I am totally against these programs and the Department of Education.” DeVos has said her goal is to displace public schools from the center of communities, so that religious institutions can resume their rightful role.

The teachers’ unions, which were built in the course of major struggles to defend and expand public education, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, have suffered the fate of all the other so-called labor organizations in America. They have become nothing more than business operations, run by a privileged layer of bureaucratic officials, who rake in huge salaries, administer billion-dollar pension and benefit funds, and willingly support charter schools and other privatization efforts providing the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) and their local affiliates can still collect dues from the underpaid, superexploited teachers whom they hire.

An affordable, high-quality education is a social right of every working-class child and youth, but this right is being destroyed by the operation of the profit system. The struggle to defend education means a struggle against capitalism. Parents, teachers, and students, and every section of the working class must take up the fight to defend the right to an education, against the capitalist class, its political representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties, and their servants in the unions. This means building a political movement of working people based on a socialist perspective.



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