

A Primer on Corporate School Reform



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“Corporate education reform” refers to a specific set of policy proposals currently driving education policy at the state and federal level. These proposals include:

- **increased test-based evaluation of students, teachers, and schools of education**
- **elimination or weakening of tenure and seniority rights**
- **an end to pay for experience or advanced degrees**
- **closing schools deemed low performing and their replacement by publicly funded, but privately run charters**
- **replacing governance by local school boards with various forms of mayoral and state takeover or private management**
- **vouchers and tax credit subsidies for private school tuition**
- **increases in class size, sometimes tied to the firing of 5-10% of the teaching staff**
- **implementation of Common Core standards and something called “college and career readiness” as a standard for high school graduation.**

These proposals are being promoted by reams of foundation reports, well-funded think tanks, a proliferation of astroturf political groups, and canned legislation from the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Counsel (ALEC).

Together these strategies use the testing regime that is the main engine of corporate reform to extend the narrow standardization of curricula and scripted classroom practice that we’ve seen under No Child Left Behind, and to drill down even further into the fabric of schooling to transform the teaching profession and create a less experienced, less secure, less stable and less expensive professional staff. Where NCLB used test scores to impose sanctions on schools and sometimes students (e.g., grade retention, diploma denial), test-based sanctions are increasingly targeted at teachers.

A larger corporate reform goal, in addition to changing the way schools and classrooms function, is reflected in the attacks on collective bargaining and teacher unions and in the permanent crisis of school funding across the country. These policies undermine public education and facilitate its replacement by a market-based

system that would do for schooling what the market has done for health care, housing, and employment: produce fabulous profits and opportunities for a few and unequal outcomes and access for the many....

Standardized tests have been disguising class and race privilege as merit for decades. They’ve become the credit default swaps of the education world. Few people understand how either really works. Both encourage a focus on short-term gains over long-term goals. And both drive bad behavior on the part of those in charge. Yet these deeply flawed tests have become the primary policy instruments used to shrink public space, impose sanctions on teachers and close or punish schools. And if the corporate reformers have their way, their schemes to evaluate teachers and the schools of education they came from on the basis of yet another new generation of standardized tests, it will make the testing plague unleashed by NCLB pale by comparison.

Let’s look for a minute at what corporate reformers have actually achieved when it comes to addressing the real problems of public education:

First, they over-reached and chose the wrong target. They didn’t go after funding inequity, poverty, reform faddism, consultant profiteering, massive teacher turnover, politicized bureaucratic management, or the overuse and misuse of testing.

Instead, they went after collective bargaining, teacher tenure, and seniority. And they went after the universal public and democratic character of public schools.

Look again at the proposals the corporate reformers have made prominent features of school reform efforts in every state: rapid expansion of charters, closing low performing schools, more testing, elimination of tenure and seniority for teachers, and test-based teacher evaluation.

If every one of these policies were fully implemented in every state tomorrow, it would do absolutely nothing to close academic

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achievement gaps, increase high school graduation rates, or expand access to college.

There is no evidence tying any of these proposals to better outcomes for large numbers of kids over time. The greatest gains in reducing gaps in achievement and opportunity have been made during periods when concentrated poverty has been dispersed through efforts at integration, or during economic growth for the black middle class and other communities, or where significant new investments in school funding have occurred.

Or take the issue of poverty. Most teachers agree that poverty is no excuse for lousy schooling; much of our work is about proving that the potential of our students and communities can be fulfilled when their needs are met and the reality of their lives is reflected in our schools and classrooms. But in the current reform debates, saying poverty isn't an excuse has become an excuse for ignoring poverty.

Corporate reform plans being put forward do nothing to reduce the concentrations of 70/80/90% poverty that remain the central problem in urban education. Instead, educational inequality has become the entry point for disruptive reform that increases instability throughout the system and creates new forms of collateral damage in our most vulnerable communities.

The "disruptive reform" that corporate reformers claim is necessary to shake up the status quo is increasing pressure on 5,000 schools serving the poorest communities at a time of unprecedented economic crisis and budget cutting. The latest waiver bailout for NCLB announced recently by Education Secretary [Arne] Duncan would actually ratchet up that pressure. While it rolls back NCLB's absurd adequate yearly progress system just as it was about to self-destruct, the new guidelines require states that apply for waivers to identify up to 15% of their schools with the lowest scores for unproven "turnaround" interventions, "charterization," or closing.

Teachers and schools, who in many cases are day to day the strongest advocates and most stable support system struggling youth have, are instead being scapegoated for a society that is failing our children. At the same time, corporate reformers are giving parents triggers to blow up the schools they have, but little say and no guarantees about what will replace them.

The only thing corporate ed reform policies have done successfully is bring the anti-labor politics of class warfare to public

schools. By overreaching, demonizing teachers and unions, and sharply polarizing the education debate, corporate reform has undermined serious efforts to improve schools. It's narrowed the common ground and eroded the broad public support a universal system of public education needs to survive.

For example, there is actually a lot of common ground on the need to improve teacher support and evaluation. There's widespread agreement among educators, parents, and administrators on the following suggestions for improvement:

- **better preparation and evaluation before new teachers get tenure (or leave the profession, as 50% do within 5 years)**
- **reasonable, timely procedures for resolving tenure hearings when they are initiated**
- **a credible intervention process to remediate and if necessary remove ineffective teachers, tenured and non-tenured**

Good models for each of these ideas exist, many with strong teacher union support, but overreaching by corporate reformers has detached the issue of teacher quality from the conditions that produce it.

Their experiments are staffing our most challenging schools with novices or Teach for America temps on their way to other careers. Corporate reform plans are pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into data systems and tests designed to replace collaborative professional culture and experienced instructional leadership with a kind of psychometric astrology. These data-driven formulas lack both statistical credibility and a basic understanding of the human motivations and relationships that make good schooling possible. Instead of "elevating the profession," corporate reform is downsizing and micromanaging it.

Right now, my home state of New Jersey is getting ready to implement a so-called "growth model" developed in Colorado, where they are now giving first graders multiple choice questions about Picasso paintings and using the results to decide the compensation level and job security of teachers.

This is not "accountability."