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For the public good: Urban youth advocacy and the fight for public education

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a grassroots movement for public education that has recently emerged to challenge corporate-style education reformers. These reformers became well-established in the early 21st century promoting the business strategies of capitalism such as school choice, competition, privatization, and closure. To understand how and why local communities are fighting for public education while embracing a much older, traditional notion of the common good, this article takes Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as a case study, situating the struggle for public education in historical and political contexts. It also places the corporate-reform and grassroots movements in a social and economic framework, and it pays special attention to the urban youth who stand at the center of much of the policy debate on public education, considering the ways in which young people themselves express political agency through activism.

1. Introduction

Public education is a public good. That is the rallying cry of a new grassroots movement in the United States fighting for equity and great schools for all students. Ironically, this movement is challenging a substantial group that claims to be fighting for the same thing, seeking to apply market-driven measures from the private sector to public education. These corporate-style reformers appeal to a broad political swath of the country, yet promote the fairly radical belief that an institution widely regarded as a cornerstone of American democracy has failed. Using the language of choice, competition, accountability, and data-driven decision-making, they argue that public education ought to be subjected to business techniques, including "efficiency" in shutting down "failing" schools, and handing others over to private, for-profit corporations. To understand how and why local communities are rejecting these corporate-style reforms while embracing a much older notion of the common good, this article takes Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as a case study, situating the struggle for public education in historical and political contexts. It also places the corporate-reform and grassroots movements in a social and economic framework, paying special attention to the urban youth who stand at the center of much of the policy debate on public education.

2. Public education as a public good

The phrase "public education is a public good" can be understood in three distinct ways. First, public schools serve the public good: they perform critical functions that benefit the entire society. Primarily they do this by educating the vast majority of children in this country – in Pennsylvania, 88% of students attend public schools – and we all benefit from an educated citizenry (Crossey, 2012). Today's students will be the doctors and nurses who take care of us in our golden years, the artists who inspire us, the engineers who build our bridges, and the service providers we all depend on. Increasing rates of education also decrease crime and incarceration, benefitting us all through more stable neighborhoods and fewer prisons (Justice Policy Institute, 2007; Lochner & Moretti, 2004). In addition, public schools serve a crucial role in a democracy, creating informed citizens capable of critical thinking and self-governing and public schools provide a kind of cultural glue, an Americanizing force that historically has helped to bind together a vast and diverse nation. In all these ways, our schools do good for the public.

Second, public schools not only serve the public good, they *are* a public good in the classic economic sense of the word "good." Like clean air or a lighthouse (textbook examples of public goods), the use of public education by some does not prevent its use by others. Furthermore, public schools belong to the public and are paid for with public, taxpayer dollars. This also means that they are open to all and may not exclude students.

Underlying all of these definitions of the public good is a third ethical and ideological dimension. Public education has long been revered in the U.S. as a pathway to opportunity and success, a guarantor of the promises of being a free people, and a great social equalizer. Though it has not always lived up to these ideals, education reinforces our cherished belief in meritocracy. And for these reasons, the struggle for quality public education for all children has been a cornerstone of the long civil rights movement. For many public school advocates today, equity remains the key concern: poor school districts still struggle with vastly unequal resources. In states like Pennsylvania, poor schools have been chronically under-funded due to problematic state funding formulas and forced to rely on local property taxes, which has only

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reinforced the inequality. They have been hit the hardest by state budget cuts and borne the brunt of new state and federal educational policies implemented over the past decade. And because the socio-economic lines of class also follow lines of race in this country, people of color have been disproportionately affected.

3. Public education in historical context

Since its widespread establishment in the nineteenth century, U.S. public education has been subject to a constant stream of reform efforts. The "education crisis" we are witnessing in the first years of the 21st century was preceded by a similar sense of urgency in nearly every decade of the 20th century. Today's concerns – which center around lagging U.S. test scores compared to international peers and the persistent racial achievement gap – have deep roots and must be understood in historical context.

Education historian Diane Ravitch argues that current corporate-style reforms are really a hijacking of earlier efforts to introduce robust, voluntary education standards meant to beef up what students were learning in school. In 1983, a national commission appointed by President Reagan's secretary of education released *A Nation at Risk*, which became a media sensation. Among other things, this report documented a national decline in SAT scores, the rise of functional illiteracy among young adults, and the increasing need for remedial courses on college campuses (Ravitch, 2010).

Notably, *A Nation at Risk* identified the problem in U.S. education as the weakening of curriculum content. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, many states were starting to review curricula, hoping to strengthen academic expectations. In 1991–92 when Ravitch herself was the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education, she led a program that funded teachers and scholars developing voluntary national standards in History, English, Science, and several other academic areas. But the entire standards movement fell apart in 1994–95 when Lynne Cheney, then chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities (which had co-funded the development of the voluntary national standards), launched a scathing critique of the proposed history standards. She accused the scholars who worked on the standards of imposing a left-wing political agenda favoring history that included the stories of women and minority groups, at the expense of a more traditional cohesive history focused on the deeds of great, white men. Her comments ignited a fiercely contested debate over *whose* history should be taught in schools and the whole standards movement became a political hot potato.

When the standards movement collapsed, a new test-based accountability movement stepped in to take its place. Where *A Nation at Risk* proposed reinvigorating education through a coherent curriculum, emphasizing *what* students learn, the new accountability movement focused on testing. Since national agreement on educational content seemed all but impossible to reach, most states fell back on watered down, vague standards that would not provoke controversy. Meanwhile, reformers at the state and federal level moved towards a consensus that testing basic skills would be the nation's new approach to education. With the narrow goal of raising test scores, this framework of accountability ushered in a new era of high-stakes testing in reading and math, ignoring student learning in science, history, the arts, and other subjects.

The high-stakes testing and accountability movement solidified under federal law in 2001 when President George Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This legislation radically transformed public education policy by dramatically increasing the role of the federal government and mandating standardized testing to measure student achievement. It also created a culture of failure and blame, accusing teachers of poor performance when their students did not do well on the tests, and then labeling schools as failures when their students struggled. This effectively reinforced an existing national narrative of "failing public schools" that, despite immense evidence to the contrary, conveniently fit cultural beliefs about urban schools and minority students. In other words, NCLB grew partially out of failed efforts to effectively deal with concerns about *what* students were learning and instead imposed a rigid system that narrowly measures outcomes in terms of "achievement."

Through the first decade of the twenty-first century, NCLB generated considerable controversy, and by the end of President Barack Obama's first term in office, the Department of Education created a system of waivers exempting states from the law. The waivers themselves, however, came with strings attached for states, often requiring them to label a certain percentage of schools as failures and mandating interventions such as school closure. (What's more, the process itself was also illegal, as U.S. Secretary Arne Duncan attempted to circumvent federal law in issuing the waivers rather than working to have the law changed.) At the same time, President Obama introduced his own signature education policy, Race to the Top, which forces school districts to compete against one another for federal dollars and imposes another set of stipulations. For instance, states that accept Race to the Top money agree to evaluate teachers using their students' test scores and to open more charter schools. Critics point to the poor choice of metaphors in having students "race" to get the dollars they desperately need for their education and the fact that many states have wound up spending more on the mandates of the federal program than they actually "win" in return (Mitchell, 2012).

4. Public education in political context

These education policy changes have occurred in an unusual new political context, appealing to many on both the political left and right. During a decade of heightened partisanship following the turn of the new century, education appeared to be one of the few things on which nearly everyone could agree. The corporate rhetoric of accountability – focused on student outcomes, the racial achievement gap, using data to make decisions, and giving families choices – seemed to make sense to the majority of Americans who had become convinced that public schools were failing and that students, particularly in urban areas, were "trapped" in them. This apparent public consensus, however, disguised the role of several new political players who were working to dramatically reshape school legislation, particularly at the local and state level. These include a handful of ultra-wealthy donors and several large foundations that have taken up the "cause" of education, working behind the scenes to mold the opinions of school administrators, school boards, state and federal legislators, and the broader public.

The individual donors are mainly ultra-right conservatives who have promoted "school choice" plans and state voucher systems that channel public money to private schools. For example, Betsy DeVos, the former chair of the Michigan Republican Party and married to the heir of the Amway fortune, founded the American Federation for Children (AFC), which works across the country to promote school-choice. Between 2010 and 2012, the AFC poured $2.5 million into Pennsylvania politics alone through the Students First PA super PAC (PA State Campaign Finance Reports, 2013). The AFC is a re-branding of DeVos's organization after Wisconsin charged her group with political misconduct and Ohio fined it a record $5.2 million for illegally shifting money into that state to support school-choice candidates (Associated Press, 2008). The AFC also receives donations from other extremely wealthy donors, such as the well-known anti-union brothers, Charles and David Koch, which are then dispensed into state political races and media campaigns aimed at the general public (Nichols, 2011).

Joel Greenberg, a hedge-fund trader from Philadelphia, serves on the board of the AFC and was on Pennsylvania Governor Corbett's education transition team when he took office in 2011. Greenberg and two of his business partners, Arthur Dantchik and Jeff Yass, founded the Students First PA superPAC. They also made the list of Pennsylvania's top political campaign donors in 2012, pouring millions between them into the races