

Who's Out to Get Public Schools?

By Gerald Bracey
The Huffington Post Blog
January 30, 2008

When people think about the groups or individuals who wish to privatize public schools, they probably think of only a few foundations and people. The late Milton Friedman and John Walton and the living Paul Peterson; the Heritage Foundation, Manhattan Institute, Hoover Institution, Heartland Institute, American Enterprise Institute, Goldwater Institute, Bradley, Scaife and a scattering of others.

This is a mistake. A recent study by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy studying the years 2002 to 2006 identified 132 separate school choice organizations (www.ncrp.org , "Strategic Grantmaking"). One hundred and four of these 132 received grants from 1,212 foundations with total contributions exceeding \$100,000,000 in some years. The Walton Family Foundation (Wal-Mart) dwarfed all others with grants often exceeding \$25 million.

These foundations also funded candidates, political parties, political action groups and 501(c)4 organizations. Overwhelmingly, the recipients of this largess were Republican candidates and causes. It is no small irony that while conservatives who back the privatization of schools want to minimize the size and role of government, they have had to watch the federal government grow larger under putative conservative presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush.

The report states, "Few issues resonate so powerfully with the American public as the notion of the purported failure of public elementary and secondary schools..." It gives former Delaware Governor, Pete DuPont, the privilege of voicing this resonance: "What is one good thing that we could do for the people who are poor, who are not succeeding? We could give them an education. What does the government do worst in America? Run the school system. The school system is awful. Low-income people have no way out of that school system."

DuPont's comment reveals a common flaw in the reasoning of the privatizers: it assumes that there are enough private schools to go around. In fact, the existing private schools, even if they

wanted these poor kids, which most of them don't, could accommodate no more than 4% of students now in the public schools. In the early years of the privatization movement, analogies were often drawn to fast food restaurants--new schools would spring up as fast as McDonald's or

Starbucks. The privatizers have apparently gotten past that particular stupidity and realize that a

school is a large and complex ecosystem which requires expert knowledge not needed for hamburger flipping.

The privatizers can be critical of how conservatives fund voucher movements. Many think it is silly

to fund the large think tanks such as AEI and Heritage, because they end up forming partnerships

with people whose primary interest is in maintaining the status quo. Many advocate small funding

to, say, parents, who have a direct interest (it is alleged) in change. In fact some people have accused the large conservative think tanks with having a basic distrust of democracy. Giving money directly to parents, on the other hand, reflects a belief that parents can select the schools

best for their children.

It is interesting in this connection that supporters of the oldest (18 years) and largest (19,000 students) voucher program in the country, that in Milwaukee, have just begun a million-dollar campaign to build support for the program. According to an article in the January 28, 2008 Milwaukee Journal Sentinel the group "will sponsor television, radio and print advertising over the

next four months as well as undertaking other activities aimed at increasing positive opinions of the program."

Of course, the simplest way to build support would be to show that the program works. This has

not been done in Milwaukee or elsewhere (the alleged big gains Paul Peterson found for blacks in

New York City disappeared when proper statistical techniques were used). Evaluations of the program after five years reached contradictory conclusions, the most reasonable one being, in my

opinion, that the program had no impact on reading achievement and a small impact on mathematics achievement. The researcher, Cecilia Rouse of Princeton, observed, though, that voucher students attended smaller classes and that class size could easily be the source of the

voucher students' advantage. After that evaluation, voucher supporters in the legislature expressed their confidence in the program by killing any further funding for evaluations.

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