

Democracy & Education

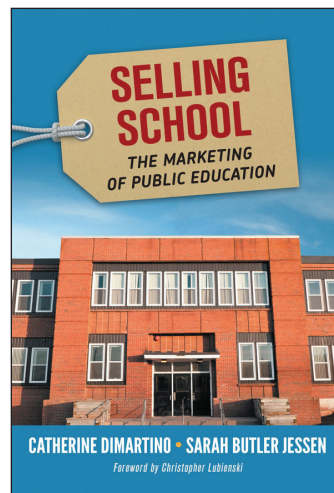
High Costs to Peddling Solutions in Search of Problems

A Book Review of *Selling School: The Marketing of Public Education*

T. Jameson Brewer (University of North Georgia)

THE PRIVATIZATION AND commercialization of public education in the United States has long been the dream of reformers seeking to turn schooling over to market forces (Chubb & Moe, 1990). The theory, as it were, is that public schools are wrought with failure, and the injection of marketplace competitors represents the only viable solution to that perceived failure (Friedman, 1955, 1997, 2002; Walberg & Bast, 2003). A commitment persists to ignore the growing body of literature that finds little reason to put stock in the failed-school and the bad-teacher myths (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Berliner & Glass, 2014; Kumashiro, 2012) in favor of supporting an ideological commitment to privatization. The growing educational marketplace of charter schools, school vouchers, and privatized alternative teacher certification programs has, in fact, continued to grow and seemingly is growing for the sake of growing.

Competition requires competitors, and marketplaces require marketing—this much is simple. The reliance on competition necessitates a mechanism for comparison and selling, and it is through such advertisements that a product or brand seeks to set itself apart from others in the insatiable quest for customers and money. While much on school privatization has been written over the past two decades, there remains a dearth in the conversation surrounding one of the most crucial components of the educational marketplace: the use of advertising in the public-versus-private debate. Thankfully, DiMartino and Jessen's *Selling School: The Marketing of Public Education* (2018) provides such a conversation.



Setting the tone for the book in the foreword, Christopher Lubienski (in disclosure, my former doctoral advisor) rightly pointed out that a primary aim of reformers is to blur the lines between what is public and what is private, and the market-ing surrounding those efforts tells us a great deal about how the state of schools is perceived and how providers interpret and understand their prospective “clients.”

As noted by DiMartino and Jessen (2018), the manufactured crisis of “failed schools”

(not the specific terminology they use) is often promoted through educational advertising (or “edvertising”) that promises to address what reformers frame as a civil rights issue and have for quite some time (Frankenberg, 2011; Gordy, 2010; Powell, 2017). That is, edvertising operates from the assumption of failed schools, contextualized within racial and economic inequalities, and surmises that schooling represents a civil rights injustice that can only be solved through markets and competition; read: capitalism.

The introduction and opening chapters provide the reader with a reasoned overview of the role of edvertising in spreading the message of privatization while pointing out that parents and

T. JAMESON BREWER is an assistant professor of social foundations at the University of North Georgia. His research focuses primarily on the impact of the privatization of education by way of charters, school vouchers, homeschooling, and alternative teacher certification programs.

citizens must develop critical analytical skills to discern between hype and reality—a point DiMartino and Jessen (2018) return to in a later chapter, raising compelling points that edvertising, if regulated similarly to other advertising, may very well be sanctioned by the Federal Trade Commission for its misleading claims. Providing readers with a broad overview of the general mechanics of advertising, DiMartino and Jessen connected these practices within the educational marketplace, noting that, not unlike the marketing of other products, edvertising that is most successful relies on targeted campaigns, development of a brand, trust in that brand, impression management, and “glossification”—effectively, a high-quality advertising product—and consumer preferences. Also not too dissimilar to the broader world of advertising, edvertising for charter schools must establish an emotional need for the product, which may not necessarily exist a priori within the marketplace. Yet because the benefits of schooling are often not manifested immediately for students, the promise of future outcomes becomes integral in establishing a product’s value.

DiMartino and Jessen (2018) charted the rise of new positions within the charter school landscape specifically tasked with producing and monitoring the edvertising of their respective brands. The rise of these positions correlates with a sharp rise in funding allocation to edvertising among the largest charter networks (e.g., KIPP, ReNew), and as DiMartino and Jessen pointed out, budgets reflect priorities and are an expression of values. In the case of increasing charter edvertising, the acquisition of students and growing the charter brand—perhaps for the sake of growing the brand—highlight a potential shift away from a concentration on pedagogical innovations in lieu of advertising innovations. The majority of these newly created charter-school edvertising positions come with six-figure incomes that would take many teachers three to four years of income to match.

DiMartino and Jessen (2018) pointed out that, given their size, established charter school brands like KIPP no longer need to rely on massive edvertising campaigns and can resort to maintenance campaigns characterized by compelling stories, while newer charter networks or those focused on niche markets must spend a significant amount of money on edvertising. And while the authors noted a considerable lack of transparency associated with charter school budgets, they provided the reader with an incredibly useful analysis of how charter schools and networks are spending money in relation to student acquisition. Despite their notable efforts to piece together a picture of how charters spend their money, the widespread culture of secrecy surrounding charter schools should be a considerable concern for all citizens. It is important to keep in mind that charter schools are publicly funded, which would, normally, suggest that the public would have the ability to oversee how its tax dollars are being spent. Yet the culture of secrecy surrounding budget allocations exposed by the authors raises significant questions about an erosion of democratic values and the possibility of legitimate oversight.

DiMartino and Jessen (2018) showed that charter schools and charter networks are outspending public schools many times over in their edvertising—noting that Success Academies in New York spend exponentially higher amounts of money than their

geographic charter competitors and the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE). Case in point, two Success Academy schools, Cobble Hill and Williamsburg, spend \$2,561.72 and \$2,904.10, respectively, to recruit each student. Comparatively, much of this per-student money in NYC DOE would be allocated to other efforts, including instruction. What DiMartino and Jessen did not point out is that many of these charter schools—namely, Success Academy and KIPP—notoriously benefit from student attrition without replacement (Horn, 2011). The practice of losing students (through self-removal or being pushed out) from their cohorts as they progress through the grades allows Success Academy to “engineer student populations to achieve high test scores” (Casey, 2016) and inflated graduation rates, and such a practice likely expands the total edvertising cost per student, considering the initial recruitment costs compared to the smaller group of students remaining at some point in the future.

The authors (2018) provided a concise discussion of the myriad ways in which charter networks spread their advertisements by way of direct mailing, newspaper ads, radio spots, outdoor ads (e.g., subway media), digital advertising (mainly across social media platforms), and word of mouth. DiMartino and Jessen (2018) provided a most unique and in-depth analysis of edvertising across those platforms. Notably, 100% of charter management organization (CMO) charter schools employ flash graphics on their websites and have high-resolution “glossy” pictures and graphics, whereas only 11% of the public schools in the comparison group had such a website and 0% used high-resolution photos and graphics. Other disparities in practices between CMO charter schools and public schools are that the CMO charter schools are far more likely to have mission statements, promote professional-quality videos, have a slogan, have a school name that incorporates a brand, employ academic-outcome cues like *college prep*, and have clear branded colors. To the earlier point of budgets reflecting priorities, public schools do not place as much value on flashy advertising and brand development as they do on actual instruction. Moreover, in the digital era, DiMartino and Jessen found that the CMO charters have an average of 12,653 followers across their social media platforms compared to the 93 for non-choice public schools. This digital capital, as it were, aids charter schools and reformers to promote the façade of quality and prestige in their effort to siphon students away from public schools.

The development and maintenance of a brand is a critical component within a marketplace and advertising. DiMartino and Jessen (2018) pointed out throughout their text that many of the largest and most established charter school networks (e.g., KIPP) and alternative teacher certification organizations (e.g., Teach For America) go as far as requiring, within each organization, identical phrasings, imagery, and use of organizational rhetoric not just in their formal edvertising products but in members’ speech and behavior patterns. As an alumnus of Teach For America (TFA) myself who also worked on staff during TFA’s summer institute, I can confirm that DiMartino and Jessen are correct that many of these organizations micromanage their

brands to the point of controlling the font that is used on all communications and advertisements; TFA mandates the use of didot font. DiMartino and Jessen pointed out that these practices reflect an effort to ensure fidelity and loyalty to the organizational branding.

To DiMartino and Jessen's (2018) point, branding is everything within an educational marketplace while pedagogy and student outcomes take a back seat. In the quest to ensure brand loyalty among not only their clients (students and parents) but their employees (teachers), privatization reform organizations and charter networks engage in overt efforts to mold TFA teachers and charter school teachers (as is often the case, many charter school teachers are TFA) into "active evangelists of organizational messaging" (p. 100). During my time on staff at TFA, we daily engaged in what amounted to surveillance of incoming corps members, monitoring for any conversation that challenged the TFA brand, the organization's mission, or its practices. Corps members deemed to be out of compliance were sequestered and spoken to in an attempt to maintain loyalty and perception of the brand. DiMartino and Jessen dedicated a significant length to a discussion on TFA, its recruiting methods/techniques, and its marketing messages (both externally and internally). The authors noted that TFA recruiting and marketing are effectively the same thing, and the organization will go to just about any length to increase its recruitment numbers, and in most of the interviews they conducted, the authors revealed members' great sense of disappointment and animosity toward TFA. DiMartino and Jessen were quick to point out that while their findings do not necessarily represent all TFA corps member experiences, their findings do confirm what is a growing body of literature on the very subject (Millen, 2015).

While DiMartino and Jessen (2018) did not point this out, TFA's aggressive campaigns to increase applications appear to be an effort to artificially manipulate the organization's acceptance rate. That is, while TFA markets its minimum GPA as 2.5, the average incoming corps member boasts a 3.5 (Brewer, 2017). Because TFA has no interest in bringing college graduates who have a 2.5 on board with its organization, the low-floor minimum artificially inflates application numbers for the purpose of maintaining a low acceptance rate. DiMartino and Jessen did point out that charter school advertising relies on a perception of prestige; TFA's manipulated acceptance rate aligns with this same misleading advertising practice.

DiMartino and Jessen (2018) closed their book with a discussion of how the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) normally assesses normal advertisements, seeking to curtail misleading claims. After providing a rich analysis of how advertisers leverage YouTube videos and a minute-by-minute evaluation of the imagery and messaging of those videos, DiMartino and Jessen concluded that were advertisements held to the same standards as other marketplace advertisements, the FTC would conclude that the net impression was wholly misleading. Video advertisements insinuate that there is a correlation between attendance at a charter school and college graduation. In all, charter school YouTube videos give the impression that most, if

not all, of their students graduated from high school and attended college. Videos from TFA were found to be more oriented to the benefit of disrupting the educational status quo with corps members who are "ready to take on this idea of inequity" (p. 133) and then transition into leadership positions within the broader TFA network.

DiMartino and Jessen (2018) concluded with two questions that, in my view, represent the crux of their text: "When do aspirations and values cross over into simply being marketing ploys? When and how must organizations use caution in constructing the net impressions within promotional messages" (p. 144)? In short, DiMartino and Jessen provided ample answers to both of those pressing questions. The data collected and analyzed for the reader make it abundantly clear that much of the advertising practices within the charter school network and organizations like TFA are, minimally, marketing ploys and, at most, damaging to the equational landscape and student learning. As budgets reflect priorities, it is clear from DiMartino and Jessen's text that what matters most for education reformers is advertising their brand and growing for the sake of growing. This has opened the opportunity for advertising from these organizations to convey deceptive messages to potential parents and students while creating hostile environments for teachers. The muddle of private-public spaces has redefined how we conceive of education and the resulting educational marketplaces. While marketplaces are, by their nature, full of advertisements from competing interests, the key takeaway from *Selling School*, in my view, is that those pushing privatized education reform are keen on advertising what may very well be nothing but overhyped snake oil that is a solution in search of a problem.

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