

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The Neoliberal Attack on the Public Education of Students of Color

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In the late 19th century, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision sustained a legal standard of separate but equal. The unfortunate result was a continuation of laws that relegated children to racially separate and unequal schools in the Jim Crow South. For almost 70 years, students of color dwelled in the valley of government-funded inferior legal education. Then, in 1954, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) victory in *Brown v. Board* struck down the separate but equal doctrine.

The negative reaction by Whites to integration that I experienced was deep and profound. In the South, public schools were closed. Home schooling and voucher segregation academies flourished purposefully to block integration and specifically drain funds from public schools serving African American students. In the North, segregation and redlining by neighborhood persisted. Additionally, policies were created to promote small segregated schools within large public schools—which still gave White students a separate, privileged schooling experience. Due to “White flight” from cities, the suburbs grew rapidly and school funding mushroomed in predominately White neighborhoods. With the funding came quality teachers and an abundance of resources in schools. The opposite was true in the urban core of the cities.

Despite these setbacks, schools serving students of color that remained in the inner city tried various school choice strategies to halt the White flight. Magnet schools were one of the most innovative approaches that were created initially to promote integration. Unfortunately, since that time, magnet schools have largely failed to realize their promise as mechanisms of equity and inclusion as they became increasingly selective and less integrated.

After *Brown*, Milton Friedman and other White academics wrote about giving every student a voucher so they could choose a privately managed

school in an education market. The first major push to bring these economic ideas into reality occurred during the late 1980s and 1990s. Proponents of school privatization tried to pass school vouchers in California, Texas, Pennsylvania and many other states. A grand bargain was struck in many states when a different market-based school choice option was codified by legislatures instead—charter schools.

Charter schools have grown rapidly since their inception in Minnesota in 1991. There are now thousands of charter schools serving millions of students in the United States. I chaired the NAACP’s Task Force on High Quality Education, and our concluding report found that during the past decade the number of students in charter schools has nearly tripled, with approximately 3.1 million students enrolled in 2016-17. We also found that 1 in 8 African American students now attends a charter in the United States—more than any other race/ethnicity (NAACP, 2017).

Considering the rapid growth and growing critiques of charter schools—many of which are represented in this special volume for the Journal of Transformative Leadership and Policy Studies (JTLPS)—public school supporters are engaged in a heated discourse with the private sector about who should educate urban students of color. Neighborhood public schools are caught in the crossfire of neoliberal privatization and private control push for charters that has recently swept through sectors such as healthcare, energy and prisons. Titans of industry, hedge funds, and private entrepreneurs are using market-based school choice to wrest away control of the nation’s annual \$5 billion school budget from democratic control and the public sector.

Neighborhood public schools are also the center of an attack being waged by wealthy foundations that are spending hundreds of millions of dollars in support of privately controlled schools. Billionaires

such as the Walton Family, the Koch Brothers, Eli Broad, Bill Gates and others proffer that a market-based system benefits and improves public schools for urban students of color. Their argument is a ruse. The critical research in this special volume was recently underscored by testimony gathered by our NAACP Task Force on High Quality Education from communities across the nation. The voices from communities most impacted by charters (New Orleans, Detroit et al.) in the aforementioned report demonstrated that the market-based school choice movement is dedicated to competitive ideals that are antithetical to a public education committed to serve all students regardless of their needs or cost.

This could be the last big push to save neighborhood public schools and democratic control of public education. Here is why. We've allowed the constant bashing of public education in the inner cities to distort its effectiveness and undermine its essential mission and funding. Titans of industry, hedge funds, and private entrepreneurs used a test-score driven accountability to weave a narrative of global public education failure to seize the opportunity to profit. America should pause and examine the privatization path we are now pursuing. This issue of JTLPS undertakes this task. I commend the scholars' work in this special volume. It is clear that they are committed to the American ideal of public education and have carefully studied the opportunities and the challenges that plague charter schools today.

Public education was originally founded to lift up the American citizenry. While significant challenges still remain for urban students of color, writ large, our system of public education should be commended because our nation is still the most powerful on the planet and is one of the most productive in the history of any modern society. We must not allow the mission of public education—having a well-informed, active citizenry to reach a more perfect union—to be co-opted to empower the pursuit of private-management, privatization and profit on the backs of students of color.

REFERENCES

NAACP Task Force on Quality Education Hearing Report, 2017. Retrieved from http://www.naacp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Task_ForceReport_final2.pdf

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