

HEMISPHERIC CONFERENCE ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

Preparatory Meeting, Mexico City, November 4-8, 1998

Effects of Neo-Liberal Policies on U.S. Public Education: Regulation, Sales and Purchase

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The U.S. corporate forces began to organize their present neo-liberal policies in the mid-1970s. These policies consisted of an attack on governmental institutions that serve a public or social purpose and a promotion of public policies that replace this public purpose with a market ideology and/or a market practice.

The neo-liberal attack on U.S. public education began in earnest with the publication of A Nation At Risk report in 1983 and continued with the subsequent promotion of an "educational crisis" by the corporate owned mass media.

The business and media promoters of this "crisis" said that the United States must now compete in the global economy, but the public schools have failed our society. Our schools have failed us because our school children don't have the skills to compete. In order for the US to compete successfully, schools must incorporate new skills in their curriculum, raise school standards, test to those standards and be held accountable when students fail to pass the tests.

There is an important corollary to this attack. All this "restructuring" of the schools can be done without any new funding. Existing money only needs to be reallocated. New funds that might go toward increased expenditures per pupil, higher teacher salaries, smaller class size or new school construction would only be wasted. Schools must first establish and meet the new standards.

This attack has been consistently promoted by corporate business groups and the commercial mass media since 1984 and it remains the dominant policy direction for public education in the United States.

The effects of this fifteen year attack on public schools has been to demoralize advocates of a strong public education system and to open the doors of U.S. public schools to a flood of neo-liberal policies that have yet to run their full course.

The US public education system is a highly decentralized system in which 44 million school children and 2.5 million teachers work and learn in 85,000 schools run by 14,000 locally elected school districts. The locally elected school districts are in charge of formal policy making, but their funding comes primarily from a combination of local and state government sources, with a modest amount of federal funds. It is through their alliance with state governments that the corporate leaders have constructed and enforced their neo-liberal policies.

The main thrust of neo-liberal education policy in the U.S. has been the introduction of a single purpose for public schools and a several new methods for reaching that purpose.

In the past history of U.S. public schools, there has been a continuous tension between two competing goals: schools as spaces to prepare children for participation as citizens in the construction of a democratic society and schools as spaces for the shaping of a workforce reflective of contemporary corporate needs. This former purpose has been effectively silenced in the past fifteen years. Public schools are now seen as "good or bad" depending on whether or not they speak and act in line with the corporate-led reforms and business leadership.

With their ideological victory intact, corporate-led reform groups have initiated a series of state and local level public policies that have encountered little opposition from the public education establishment made up of organized teachers, staff, principals and superintendents.

The first policy is corporate regulation of student performance. Corporate lobbyists have succeeded in getting state laws passed which mandate new publicly funded corporate testing systems. These systems typically raise the standards for English, math and science courses, test to those standards at 4th, 8th and 10th grades, flunk the majority of children and then hold the local school district and its teachers accountable for this "failure" in news articles or de-funding schemes.

The results of this corporate regulation of student performance are predictable. Testing funds replace instructional funds. Teaching is replaced with cheerleading and administration of tests that teachers neither design, grade nor possess. Test results sort students by socio-economic status. A small cadre of successful test takers are identified for corporate recruitment. A majority of students are labeled "failures." The public intensifies its search for alternatives to public schools. Underfunded school districts look for new sources of revenue to fund instruction since the public no longer wants to pay for schools that create "failures."

Corporate regulation of student performance accomplishes its main goal of dismantling the public purpose of schools, as well as identifying a small number of successful test takers for future business careers. Neo-liberal policies, however, do not stop there. They are also aimed at capturing the market that those 44 million school children represent.

Public schools faced with a shortage of state or federal funds for instructional purposes look first to the property tax payers within their local school district. In districts where property values and family incomes are high, the school district can find that extra money by raising property taxes. However, in those districts where family income and property values are low, voters often oppose tax increases for schools. They can't afford it.

This situation creates great inequalities within the same state public school system and makes poorer school districts susceptible to corporate blackmail. The stage is now set for neo-liberal policies that introduce market activity directly into the school itself. We have now moved from corporate regulation to corporate sales.

These policies range from the introduction of televised advertisement in the classroom in exchange for "free" technology, to corporate grants of money in exchange for the exclusive franchise to sell products within the school, to contracting with corporations to manage the public school as a "cost-saving" device. With a public education establishment unwilling to take on the logic and dominance of corporate regulation, local school districts in the U.S. will increasingly resort to corporate sales contracts for scarce funds.

The final neo-liberal policy that flows from corporate regulation is outright corporate purchase of the public education system itself. At the local level, corporate purchase is in the form of proposals to form private charter or voucher schools that would utilize public funds but be controlled privately.

At the national level, corporate purchase is best represented by investment firm strategies to break up the \$300 billion dollar K-12 "delivery" market into the five sectors of management, child care, specialties, content and retail and then assign corporate firms to purchase each sector. These strategies will depend on a citizenry that has given up on the notion of public schools.

These neo-liberal policies of corporate regulation of student performance, direct sale of advertisement and products to a captured student market and the purchase of the public system itself are proceeding in an unchallenged manner in the United States. These policies are slowly and strategically dismantling the public education system as an autonomous space within which students and teachers can discover a common social purpose and fulfill the promise of a democratic society.

As the United States takes leadership in the construction of various trade agreements such as NAFTA, APEC and the FTAA, these same neo-liberal policies will be promoted and implemented within member countries.

It is clear to me that the resistance to these policies must come from those countries who understand public education as a social right and as a fundamental basis for democracy. I hope to work with you to build this resistance and, at some point, to bring this resistance to public education unions in the United States.