

Look out for the further destruction of public schools through “entrepreneurship” and foundation att

By Craig Gordon

We need to define more clearly what we mean by “privatization.” When many of us talk about a privatization agenda, I don’t think we necessarily mean that all public schools will disappear from the landscape in the near or even long range.

At least, I don’t. Instead, we could see the public school system shrink and transform into something very different. It will be still be nominally public, but the inequality will grow even greater, or at least, will become easier to justify in the name of “choice” and “competition.”

One aspect of what I mean is that schools like Edison are technically public, yet they transfer public dollars into the hands of private investors. But the privatization effect of charters goes much further: for-profit and not-for-profit charters alike conform schools to principles of privately run enterprises, especially competition and exclusion. Charters must compete for markets (students). Charters pick and choose who attends them (and who doesn’t). Competition is touted as the high virtue that makes charters “superior” (despite much evidence to the contrary), and exclusivity is a major attraction for individual parents and students. The ability to exclude is an important factor in the success of those charters that are, in fact, successful.

Oakland now leads all urban districts in California in the number of charter schools per capita. With about 6000 students, charters have about 1/7 the number of students remaining in the city’s regular public schools (41,000), but nearly all of that shift has occurred in the past six years, and it’s accelerating.

An even more pervasive privatizing force is the funding system called Results Based Budgeting, imposed by the state-appointed administrator running Oakland schools since 2003. Randy Ward, sent here by the Broad Foundation, has championed RBB as the solution to the district’s inefficiency, because it makes every school operate as a small business. Each school’s budget depends upon its average daily attendance (not enrollment), so a big school in a poor neighborhood with low attendance rates might actually get fewer dollars than a smaller school in a wealthier neighborhood. Ward proudly sold this Broad vision of “educational entrepreneurship” that makes each principal a CEO who must maximize revenues (attending students) and minimize costs (especially salaries) to survive. “CEOs” compete with each other to attract more students, get them into the building and hire the newest, lowest-paid teachers they can find, demand more waivers to the union contract (if the union survives) to get more done with fewer resources and reduced staff. Teacher burnout and high turnover equals a perpetually young, cheap staff. Yes, these are “public” schools, but operating on a private sector model.

We’ve challenged the district about the inequities of Results Based Budgeting, punishing schools in poor neighborhoods because of structurally and historically lower attendance rates and favoring schools in richer neighborhoods able to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars from parents. But administration has the answer: Grants. District administrators promise to give extra support to poorer schools in finding the grants to apply for. (That’s what they told us at a district workshop on RBB, 7/7/2004.) And how do they respond when asked about one small high school with ample resources from multiple private grants that sits literally next to another small school without enough funding to maintain a copy machine? Here’s how the leader of small school reform in Oakland responded: “Now it is a serious problem, the inequities that sometimes get formed, because some people are very entrepreneurial and get those things and some people are not. Our position has always been it’s better to get and then try to backfill and get from somewhere else, than to say, well, if everybody can’t have it, then nobody can have it.

Who can argue with that? If you’re going to depend on private sources of funding, how can you expect it to be equitable? By the way, the quote is from Steve Jubb, Executive Director of the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES). (Workshop at Coalition for Essential Schools Fall Forum, San Francisco, 11/13/2004)

Meanwhile BayCES plays a leading role in the district's "redesign" project, jump-started with a \$24 million grant from Gates, Broad, Dell, and major corporations based in Oakland. None of it is for classrooms; all of it goes into technology and training administrators to transform the entire district into a decentralized network of individual businesses. The corporate executives and administrators leading this transformation describe the project as "revising the district from a centrally focused institution to a school-based business service" that "delivers school services through an innovative model in which individual schools act as customers with the flexibility to invest in the services they believe will make the biggest difference to their students." (Stated at a press conference in Oakland to announce the grant for district redesign, 11/15/2005.) Meanwhile, the corporations "investing" (their word) the millions have made it clear that they intend to hold the district accountable to "get results." So, private money is used to drive the district reform according to a business model, and corporate executives will hold the district accountable to fulfill the plan and to attain goals set by these private funders. Can we call that privatization, even though it leaves a network of "public" schools standing?

Meanwhile, charters will continue to eat away at the regular public system, leaving fewer resources (reducing economies of scale) and increasing demoralization. The inequality may worsen, but the most-engaged parents, normally most likely to protest educational injustice, are also those with the greatest ability to seek charters or the best schools in the public system for their own children; many of them will be pacified as inequity grows. Students and parents stuck in the worst schools will be blamed more than ever for their own predicament. ("What's wrong with you? There are choices out there!") There will be enough successful schools to pacify enough people, charters and non-charters; the differences between them will fade as Results Based Budgeting prevails and union contracts and work rules are watered down. Pockets of success will perpetuate themselves and breed relative stability — especially as few teachers or families want to leave these islands — and failure will breed more failure. No problem, because those failing schools will be dissolved and replaced with new schools with new promises. Just like the business world: each year a large percentage of existing businesses fail, but they're replaced by promising new ones. What's the big deal? That's our new "public" school system.

It's not only about profiteering through charters and contracting out services, though that's part of it. It's not about eradicating every vestige of public schooling, though it may reduce the public system to a shell of what it's been. (We have public hospitals, don't we?) But I think it has a lot to do with eliminating the expectation of quality public education as a civil right. True, that expectation has never been fulfilled, but the process we're witnessing right now is eroding the ground beneath movements fighting to make it a reality. It destabilizes and disorients communities, it continues to reshuffle the deck, and makes the prospect of educational equality appear impractical, just as equality seems an impossible dream in every other sphere that's thoroughly privatized (e.g., health care, housing, food), just as capitalism itself makes economic equality appear unattainable.

And it's not about anything so simple as a conspiracy, either. Yes, those well-endowed foundations and their elite strategy retreats ain't for nothing; their participants effectively plan their moves within a system already tilted in their favor. So their job is easier than ours, but their success isn't guaranteed. We, too, can recognize what's going on; we, too, can plan, strategize, organize and push back. Sometimes we can even win.