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IN DEFENSE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A TOOLKIT FROM THE MIDWEST

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Abstract: One of the defining features of public schools is that they operate at the will of the people, with public oversight from elected school boards. In addition to being free and open to all, free from religious affiliation, and promoting civic understanding and participation, much of what makes public schools public happens through the democratic process. We have noticed that many teachers are so overworked and overwhelmed - rightly focused on their own classrooms and their own students' day to day struggles - that it's not easy for them to engage and advocate for themselves and their students in the ways they would like, even though their input is sorely needed. We hope to demystify the policy process to help educators influence public conversations about education that too often happen without their participation. We know many educators who want to engage in policy discussions, but need tools to help them do so as part of their already overwhelming schedules. We begin here with a brief overview of the U.S. school privatization movement to provide context for why educator advocacy is so needed. Then, we offer experiences from our state of Nebraska, one of three states with no school privatization policies on the books. Finally, we give educators ideas of how to get involved where they live.

“Public education does not exist for the benefit of students or the benefit of their parents. It exists for the benefit of the social order.

We have discovered as a species that it is useful to have an educated population. You do not need to be a student or have a child who is a student to benefit from public education. Every second of every day of your life, you benefit from public education.

So let me explain why I like to pay taxes for schools, even though I don't personally have a kid in school: It's because I don't like living in a country with a bunch of stupid people.”

— John Green

A Brief History of Privatization Schemes

In 1954, the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which struck down segregated schools as inherently unequal, led to increasingly integrated public schools, peaking in 1988 when “43.5 percent of all black students attended schools that were at least 50 percent white. Although research showed that integrated schools narrowed the achievement gap between minority and white students without harming the latter, the dedication of most government officials to proactive desegregation had dissipated.” (Kirp, 2012)

Directly alongside *Brown*, the economist Milton Friedman in 1955 called for the creation of private school vouchers, in part as a way for white parents to opt out of desegregation. Joanne Barkan in a thorough Washington Post article published by Valerie Strauss from May of this year writes, “In this marketized system, competition would, theoretically, eliminate low-performing schools because they wouldn't attract enough customers to stay in business. In the real world, the poor buy necessities at a price they can afford even if the quality is inferior. This is why the free market has always failed to meet the real needs of low-income people; they get what they can pay for” (Strauss, 2018).

Since the 1980s, various global industries have been increasingly privatized and deregulated, and public schools in the U.S. are no exception. Republican politicians invented and Democrats embraced a narrative that

public institutions had grown too large, too bureaucratic, and too inefficient. Never mind that history since the dawn of the industrial age would caution against empowering private businesses at the expense of all else--doing so makes most people poorer, less empowered, and robs them of opportunity.

Case in point: in 1988, Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, embraced the concept of what he called “charter schools” or “schools of choice” when he called for the reform of the public schools. Gloria Ladson-Billings called him “the first person to publicly propose charter schools” (Carter, Welner, & Ladson-Billings, 2013). At the time, a few schools already existed that were not called charter schools but embodied some of their principles.

Originally, the ideal model of a charter school was as a legally and financially autonomous government-funded public school that did not charge tuition, did not have a religious affiliation, or selective student admissions, but that would operate much like a private business; free from many state laws and district regulations, and accountable more for student outcomes rather than for processes or inputs. Minnesota was the first state to pass a charter school law in 1991. California was second, in 1992. The movement was led by educators who had become frustrated by large and complicated educational systems that were resistant to change, and so these educators wanted to innovate on behalf of their students while furthering the fundamental values of the United States’ public education system, and especially in under-resourced communities (Sizer & Wood, 2008).

However, Barkan notes, “Still, market-based reform never became a grassroots movement. It attracted elites: billionaire philanthropists, private mega foundations, finance and high-tech entrepreneurs, politicians at every level of government, business leaders, media figures, and think-tank associates. The players have been overwhelmingly white; their methods consistently top-down. Notably missing have been teachers, school administrators, parents, and students” (Strauss, 2018).

Ted Sizer, professor and founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) and co-principal of one of its charter schools, claims that charter schools have “a special obligation: to lead in demonstrating innovations in instruction, organization, curriculum, and design when it comes to improving our schools.” He goes on to say that, “Granted leeway from regulations, these charters are given the opportunity to experiment thoughtfully with multiple approaches to teaching and learning in ways that reflect the philosophy and guiding principles of the school community.” However, he feels that the fundamental reason for charters has been lost by many of the policymakers and officials in whom the public has put their trust to develop the concept of charter schooling. Instead of informing change, he argues, many of the schools “have been rushed into operation, allowed to expand without careful evaluation, and presented as an escape from public district schools.” He believes that charter schools have become a “political football” that has failed in the attempt to provide better education for children because it has lost sight of the innovative drive behind the founding ideas of charters (Sizer & Wood, 2008).

Today, this chain of events and political consensus in the absence of facts have led 45 states to adopt some version of charter schools, and 47 to adopt some mix of privatization policies including charters, vouchers, and tax credits. School privatization supporters have frequently wrapped their arguments in the language of civil rights, making the case that low-income students of color should have the “choice” to opt out of schools that are not adequately educating them.

However, a range of studies show that segregation is more intense in charter schools than in public schools, and most intense in parochial schools. Further, charter and private schools do not outperform public schools academically when controlling for parental income (Strauss, 2018). The problem with this sort of rhetoric is that the (almost exclusively white) folks perpetuating the myth of failing public schools want to “fix” marginalized people instead of focusing on fixing what marginalizes them. The problem is not poor kids and families; the problem is the inequities in society that cause their poverty.

Education is an essential component of lifting people out of poverty, but schools can’t do it alone, especially at a time when other social safety net programs are being cut and income inequality is growing. We know more students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch today than in the past and are coming to school hungry. Fewer students come from homes and neighborhoods where they are safe and where their physical and emotional needs are met.

This is why educators’ voices are so essential in the policymaking process. Many politicians have not set foot in a school since they were students themselves, decades ago, and the old adage still rings true; everyone thinks they know how to teach because everyone has been to school. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

Lessons from Nebraska

Our state of Nebraska has very strong public schools and is one of three states with no charter schools, vouchers, or tax credit scholarship policies in place (the others are North Dakota and West Virginia). We believe our state has some lessons to offer a national audience.

Nebraska boasts one of the highest four-year high school graduation rates in the country, as well as the nation's seventh-highest college-going rate. Public schools are the lifeblood of rural communities, and the state's urban school districts stack up well nationally. At the same time, the state's conservatism has led to a healthy skepticism of new techniques and policies in education before they are thoroughly proven.

Support for public schools is embedded in our state's culture, as it is in many places. This may come as a surprise to outsiders who look at Nebraska's recent voting history in presidential elections and assume most Nebraskans support party-line agendas. The truth is more complicated.

In his book *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*, Colin Woodard makes the case that there has never been one single American nation, but eleven. Using extensive data on demographics, linguistics, voting patterns and income levels, he has constructed a county-by-county map of the United States to make the case as to where these eleven nations exist. Nebraska and the other northern Plains states exist on the border between what Woodard calls the "Midlands" (settled mainly by Germanic immigrants, holds values of hard work and tolerance, residents are suspicious of federal government but supportive of local quality of life), and the "Far West," (holds libertarian values of self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship, as well as suspicion of government) (Woodard, 2012). In Nebraska, these cultures have led to a strong focus on local control of public education, and to local populations that value strong public schools and are willing to pay to support them.

This brand of conservatism has led to a reluctance to jump on the bandwagon, with the result that Nebraska has let several bad ideas in education pass us by in recent years, including the most onerous testing regimes under No Child Left Behind, not adopting Common Core standards, and declining to participate in Race to the Top. As those other reform efforts have been slowly called into question, Nebraska now finds itself in a position to maintain strong public schools rather than rebuilding them following failed experiments.

Nebraska has successfully built goodwill for schools, particularly through a nonprofit organization called Nebraska Loves Public Schools. Through their "I Love Public Schools" Campaign, they support public education one documentary film at a time. They have made over 100 films that share the stories of schools, students, and educators doing amazing things across the state.

However, Nebraska's governor has embraced a national school privatization agenda and has used his own considerable fortune to work to implement it in our state, so far unsuccessfully. Stand For Schools is an advocacy organization that formed in response to these threats, and in the two years since its founding, has played a key role in staving off legislation to create charter schools, vouchers, and tax credits, among other policies that would have hurt public schools.

In the 2018 legislative session, Stand For Schools worked with state senators on a suite of 9 bills designed to help public schools better serve all students by addressing areas of need including early childhood education access, school nutrition, mental and behavioral health services, and career education. One of the 9 bills, which would have improved rural students' access to mental and behavioral health services, passed all three rounds of debate in our Legislature before being vetoed by the governor on the last day of the legislative session, when there was no time for a veto override. In a difficult budget year, we saw this as a positive sign and intend to keep working on these issues with the help of supportive parents and teachers across the state.

Getting Involved: Your Students Need You

It is interesting to note that, prior to the appointment of the current Secretary of Education, many of the public school teachers in Nebraska we had spoken with had no clear idea of what charter schools are, how they were funded, and to what kinds of accountability they were held. Many still don't understand why they should care about privatization schemes in our state, which is that, in short, privatizers are coming for our jobs as public school educators, for our unions to dismantle them, and for our students who can make them look good, while discarding those who won't.

A Toolkit For Teachers

The following are steps teachers can and need to take to advocate for their students and themselves in the way our times demand.

1. **Vote.** We wish we didn't have to say it, but we do. Vote in every election, every time. Are all of your colleagues registered to vote? What about high school students in your district who will turn 18 by the time an election takes place? A nonpartisan voter registration event could be a great way to kick off the school year.
2. **Become involved in your teachers' union** and help educate your colleagues about threats to public schools.
3. **Learn when your state's legislative session takes place** (in many states, it begins in January and lasts a few weeks to several months). Get educated about what is happening in your state by getting familiar with your state legislature's website; you can typically search bills and resolutions by topic and by bill number.
4. **Learn the greatest threats to education in your state.** Does your state already have charter schools, vouchers, and tax credits? Are there proposals to expand those policies? Are there other efforts to declare public schools "failing," such as grading them on an A-F scale or holding back students who do not read at grade level?
5. **Policy is a team sport--don't play alone.** Use available resources to help you keep track of policy and communicate with your legislators. It's hard to keep track of moving legislation on your own, but your state union news and emails should keep you up to speed, particularly during your state's legislative session. In Nebraska, Stand For Schools provides that resource as well. The Network for Public Education lists affiliate state organizations that can also help you track policy related to school privatization and school equity.
6. **Know what you can and cannot do using district time and technology.** School district employees, like other public employees, typically cannot engage in political activity on school time, but are free to do what they choose in their personal capacity. What is considered political activity? If possible, ask an administrator or an attorney with your district. In some cases, checking union email on a district computer or using your district email address may be a violation of this policy. Consider providing your personal email, such as a gmail account, to your union rather than your district email address, and check it on your own time. Certainly any action you take as a result of a union email (whether forwarding the contents to others or attending a fundraiser for a candidate) could be considered political activity and needs to be done on your own time.
7. **Become involved in your students' communities.** Within the bounds of what is allowed in your district, make sure their families are educated about what is happening. Students can be powerful voices for change.

At the end of the day, the school privatization agenda has always been run by elites as opposed to grassroots support. So remember that, despite the political rhetoric, most Americans want and care about strong public schools. Follow these steps to speak up for your students and colleagues to make sure educators' voices are heard in policy debates about education.

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