

The Attack on Public Education: What's Behind It And How do We Respond?

Pauline Lipman
plipman@uic.edu
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Chicago is known as the home of Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, and proving ground for high stakes testing. We are the city that is hailed as the success story for mayoral control of schools, a city that was a model for NCLB and helped set the national agenda of charter schools, school closings, turnarounds, and military schools (Chicago has the most public military schools of any city in the US).

But I bring greetings from the other Chicago: the Grassroots Education Movement (a coalition of community organizations and teachers organized to fight privatization of schools in Chicago), Teachers for Social Justice (TSJ), several new social justice high schools, a hunger strike by Mexican mothers and grandmothers for a new state of the art college prep high school in their community, the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) – a social justice caucus in the teachers union in a run-off for leadership of the third largest teachers union in the US, the Committee for Safe passage, parents fighting for the restoration of their neighborhood high school to be the Hazel Johnson School for Environmental Justice in the Altgeld Gardens Public Housing development, Chicago Youth Initiating Change (CYIC), the Chicago Freedom School, and more. In short a growing organized movement for justice in education.

These two sides of Chicago represent the dual aspects of what we are up against and how we might challenge the privatization of public education in the US. I want to position myself in this dialectic: I have been studying urban education policy and participating in the struggles we've been waging in Chicago against neoliberal education policies.

A national agenda

With Arne Duncan as Obama's Sec. of Education, Chicago's education "reform" has gone national. When Duncan was appointed, the first thing he did was get on a plane to Detroit to tell the mayor and school district that the fed govt. could provide millions for Detroit's struggling school system... if Detroit would follow the Chicago example. He even offered to send a team of parents from Chicago to tell them how well it is working. (Obviously not the thousands of parents and their children who have protested, testified, packed Bd. Of Ed. Meetings, camped out at CPS headquarters in the dead of winter, pleaded and demanded to be heard.) Interviewed by the Detroit News, the new Secretary of Education said,

" I think it's a real new day in Detroit. There's a governor who cares and is passionate, a brand new mayor who's willing to take this over and stand up and be held accountable. We want to do everything we can to be a good partner. (But) marginal gains are not what we need. We need an absolutely fundamental overhaul, radical new thinking, open to ideas that are controversial and hard and tough. If there's the political courage to challenge the status quo, not only are there stimulus dollars, but we have competitive (federal) grants ... But the city has to be willing to do some things very, very differently.

Reporter: Can you give an example?

Duncan: I'm a big believer in choice and competition. You need to have strong charter schools with real accountability. You need to be willing to turn around schools that have chronically failed. By that I mean, move adults out, move in new teams to work with those children" (Detroit News Interview, May 18, 2009)"

Duncan made it plain that mayoral takeover of the school district, closing failing schools, expanding charter schools, and tying teacher evaluations to student test scores were the terms on which the fed government would look kindly at Detroit. In fact, Robert Bobb the state appointed Chief Financial Officer of the Detroit Public Schools has proposed closing 44 schools as part of an "academic plan" to expand a market of public and charter schools, introduce mandatory "no social promotion" student retention policies, evaluate teachers based on student performance, and mayoral takeover. All without consulting the elected school board.

It is no accident he began with Detroit, one of the most economically devastated deindustrialized cities in the US with a decimated public sector. In a form of what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism,” Obama/Duncan are taking advantage of the economic crisis and specifically the fiscal crisis of cities and states to introduce a structural adjustment program for US public education, specifically for urban school districts serving low-income students of color. In a re-wind of post- Katrina New Orleans, the economic crisis is a golden opportunity to accelerate the privatization of public education (from k-higher ed), to weaken teacher unions, and further streamline education to serve the corporate agenda of global economic competitiveness.

The national agenda has behind it \$4.1 billion, the Race to the Top funds, the biggest additional federal funding for education in US history. In a stroke of genius, the Dept. of Ed set up a state competition for the money and laid out terms which would make their bids favourable. Just to be sure, the Gates foundation awarded states funding for technical assistance in preparing their grant proposals, as long as they followed 8 criteria, which mirror the privatization, education markets agenda. This pushed most states to hastily pass laws raising charter caps and press for concessions from teacher unions. In one stroke they changed national policy, before even giving out the money. Beyond funding, the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, Broad Foundation, and their staffers are key players pushing this agenda in the Dept. of Education, according to reports from people on the inside.

As an example, Illinois’ bid for up to \$510 million in competitive federal stimulus grants includes a fast track timeline including .

- complete overhaul of teacher evaluations in most school districts by 2013;
- turnaround of several low-performing schools this summer and the adoption of new academic standards this fall.
- 12 so-called “super-districts” have hammered out union and administrative agreements to quickly pilot school turnarounds and teacher evaluation overhauls
- the state has already pre-screened organizations to carry out turnarounds, work that will be augmented by nearly \$45 million in federal grants and additional

fundraising and technical expertise by the national group Mass Insight that promotes turnarounds, again funded by Gates.

But even before RTTT this assault on public education was well underway. After Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was open territory for what George Lipsitz called “legalized corporate looting,” with education at the leading edge. Just weeks after the hurricane the State of Louisiana took over 100 public schools and began turning over millions of dollars of taxpayer money to private organizations to run them. The state fired all 4,500 public school teachers, broke the city’s powerful Black-led teachers union, and dismantled the school system administrative infrastructure. Right wing foundations quickly issued reports calling for vouchers and President Bush proposed \$1.9 billion for k-12 students with \$488 million targeted for national vouchers (to be used in schools anywhere). An influential report by the Urban Institute hailed New Orleans as an opportunity for a grand experiment to decentralize and privatize the school system through vouchers and charter schools. Less than a month after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, the US Department of Education gave the state of Louisiana \$20.9 million to reopen existing charter schools and open new ones, and nine months later the Department gave the state an additional \$23.9 million for new charter schools, most in New Orleans.

This is a national trend. New York city has 99 charter schools serving 30,000 students. The charters, which get priority with the school administration, have taken over coveted space from public schools, particularly in Harlem and Brooklyn where public education has been disinvested. Philly, has its own plan, Imagine 2014, modelled on Chicago’s Renaissance 2010. In Feb. Central Falls Rhode Island fired all the teachers in a struggling high school, a move applauded by Arne Duncan as a national example.

In public higher education, the states are plagued with a deep fiscal crisis produced by their investment in the plunging financial markets and failure to tax corporations and wealthy their fair share. This crisis has become the rationale to accelerate a 25 year trend toward cuts in public funding, reliance on corporate grants, privileging those sectors of the University that are keyed to business and technology,

using exploited part time teachers, and raising tuition. Accessible, affordable, quality higher education won through student struggles going back 40 years are being retrenched. We are reverting to the university as a place for only the elites, reversing the gains for more equitable access that were won by the struggles of Black, Latino and Asian students in the 1960s and 1970s. Public universities are run like corporations, prioritizing units that make money: business schools, IT, med schools, science research units – certainly not education, social work, ethnic studies, and social justice programs.

In the wake of the University of California Regents budget cuts UCLA suspended its writing support program. UC Riverside suspended gen ed requirements suggesting that students could fulfil them in community college or state schools. At UC Santa Cruz, community studies, Latin American studies, languages, the very programs racially marginalized students gravitate toward are being cut. A professor in Latin American studies who helped write the new Bolivian constitution got a pink slip. At the same time, student tuition and fees are up 41%. People have to go five years to complete an undergrad degree because they can't get into classes because so many faculty are laid off. Higher education in the US is developing into an elitist enterprise. This was the basis of the March 4 state-wide general strike at universities across California.

These policies as a whole are part of a global neoliberal project of the most powerful corporate and financial interests in alliance with national governments (and increasingly state and local) to restructure the global economy, politics, and our own consciousness along the lines of the market. They promote unregulated markets, individualism, competition, lowering the cost of labor through union busting and contracting out work to the lowest wage countries and workers, and privatizing public services. However, as the current economic crisis and the ecological disaster produced by BP show, although neoliberals promote a weak state when it comes to regulating corporations, protecting workers and consumers, and regulating banks and the market, the state is aggressive in defence of capital. The government plays an active role in helping corporations open new markets – this is crucial to understanding what is happening in education.

This neoliberal project exemplifies what David Harvey calls capitalist “accumulation by dispossession” – accumulation of profit by opening up new areas to the market and private investment: whether they be opening the Amazon rain forest to cattle ranching, companies like Monsanto patenting seeds planted for centuries by farmers in Mexico, transnational corporations privatizing water in Bolivia, or US cities privatizing public housing, roads, bridges, parking meters (in Chicago), and public schools. This is a project that has massively transferred wealth upward to a tiny minority of corporate and financial investors and bankers through the displacement, dislocation, exploitation, and theft of resources and public institutions of the vast majority. It is ironic that the unregulated free market ideology that precipitated the worst structural crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression is now promoted as a solution for public education.

Chicago as prototype

Now I want to hone in on Chicago. It is important to look at what we can learn from what has happened there because Chicago has been a prototype and model for neoliberal education policies rolling out in cities across the US. Chicago as prototype began with its famous high stakes testing and accountability, top down corporate management, and mayoral control in the late 1990s, through the privatization of public education beginning in 2004 with Renaissance 2010. Ren2010 is a policy to close “failing” schools, expand charter schools, and turn over public schools to private turnaround operators, undermining local school democracy and the teachers union. Ren2010 is a business plan for schools. It was proposed in 2003 by the Commercial Club of Chicago, an organization of the most powerful corporate and financial CEOs and political elites. It was announced by Mayor Daley in 2004 at a Commercial Club event, and the Club’s Renaissance Schools Fund co-leads Ren2010 with Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

Since 2005, CPS has closed 75 public neighborhood schools (almost all in Black and Latino neighborhoods) and opened over 100 new schools, over 2/3 privately run non-union charter or contract schools (like charters), the rest selective enrollment and boutique schools in gentrified/gentrifying neighborhoods. CPS also handed over 18 neighborhood high school and elementary schools to turn around specialists, mostly the

Academy for Urban School Leadership (funded by Gates and other corporate philanthropies) which Duncan promotes in Race to the Top as a national model.

The effects of this policy have been devastating to Black and Latino communities. It has resulted in the displacement of thousands of mostly African American and Latino low-income students. A Nov. 2009 report by the Consortium on Chicago School Research showed most displaced elementary students in closed schools were shuffled to other low-performing schools. Eight out of 10 students were transferred to schools ranking in the bottom half of the system's schools on standardized tests. There have been spikes in violence as students transported to schools outside their neighborhoods. This was most horrifically reflected in the tragic beating death of high school student Derrion Albert outside Fenger High school viewed by over a million people on youtube. In 2007 CPS made the neighborhood high school in the Altgeld Gardens Housing Complex on Chicago's far South side a selective enrollment military school. Students were transferred to Fenger High School, the nearest neighborhood school, five miles and two bus rides away. Tensions erupted from the beginning between students from the Fenger neighborhood and Altgeld Students – both neighborhoods are African American. Then in fall 2009 Fenger was made into a turnaround school and all adults in the building were fired. There were virtually no adults who knew the students and could defuse tensions when school opened. Derrion Albert's death in a school yard fight is linked to this situation. There is anecdotal evidence of push outs as a result of Ren2010 supported by the fact that enrollment data in turnaround schools is lower than the schools they replace. About 4000 union teacher jobs, including over 2000 African American teachers and administrators, have been lost as schools have been closed and charter schools opened. Ren2010 has undermined democratic control of neighborhood schools by eliminating democratically elected Local School Councils with a majority parents. Under mayoral control, the school district is now completely dominated by mayor-appointed corporate managers and saturated with corporate language. Ron Huberman, the new CEO of CPS was the head of the Chicago Transit Authority. He's running the district with business performance management indicators -- from the classroom, to the school, to the district as a whole.

In Chicago, Ren2010 is tied to gentrification, displacement of people of color, and real estate development. Closing schools in low-income communities of color pushes out residents and opening new boutique schools attracts real estate investors and middle class homebuyers. Our Data and Democracy project produced maps showing that school closings, especially in the first four years before the housing market crash, mapped on to gentrification.

Ren2010 and similar policies in New York, Philly, and nationally privatize a major public asset. It has broader consequences as well. It deepens the democratic deficits that characterize the neoliberal city, sets the stage to privatize other public services and further weaken public employee unions. And it further stratifies the school system to produce a stratified workforce.

On the other hand, Ren2010 has created new conditions for alliances between African American and Latino communities and with teachers, teacher unions, other school workers, parents and students especially in working class communities of color, education activists and progressive school reformers. The loss of teacher jobs is linked to neighborhood school closings, elimination of Local School Councils, concerns about violence from school closings and transfers, and the erosion of teaching and learning. The dialectic of these broad based attacks is that they also create condition for new alliances across our communities and between k-12 and public higher ed. And they are an opportunity to unite behind a new, more socially just vision of public education. Nationally, we are beginning to see an education movement emerge. There are city-wide coalitions such as GEM in Chicago and New York, social justice teacher union caucuses in unions in Chicago, LA, New York, teachers activist organizations in Chicago, San Diego, New York, the Bay Area, Milwaukee and elsewhere. Youth are organizing everywhere.

In Chicago we have been challenging privatization every step of the way through demonstrations, mobilizing thousands for school closing hearings, introducing bills in the state legislature and city council, and student walk outs. On May 25 we had a massive demonstration against CPS budget cuts that temporarily took over streets in downtown Chicago during rush hour. We've stopped some school closings and forced CPS to react and backtrack, but we haven't stopped their agenda. We have learned a lot but we still

have a lot to learn and above all need a sharper analysis and a real strategy to build a broad based movement to challenge privatization and to transform public education.

We need more than opposition to what we are against. Forging a social movement to defend public education means defining what we are for. It is not surprising that some parents and students in Chicago are not enthusiastic about defending public education. Public schools, like other public services (think public assistance, public hospitals, the police) have a deeply flawed record of exclusion, disrespect, racism, hostility, even violence for working class and low-income people of color. Collectively developing a mandate for public education that is inclusionary, democratic, and just is one of our central tasks.

Strategic role of social justice teacher unionism

I also think we need to think more deliberately about how we can win, and here I want to talk about the strategic role of social justice teacher unions. The emergence of social movement teacher unionism in the US is of critical importance. While community mobilizations bring both power and perspective, unionized teachers occupy a strategic social location. As part of a broader social movement teacher unions allied with community based organizations and youth are essential to challenge the neoliberal agenda and to forge an alternative education agenda centered on social justice.

CORE in Chicago took a leading role fighting the school closings last year in coalitions with community organizations and Teachers for Social Justice. Social movement teacher unionism, particularly its ascendance in a couple of the biggest cities in the US, could influence the direction of the AFT nationally. And more broadly, the Chicago Teachers Union is the largest union in the city. A progressive leadership could help forge the kind of movement among unionized workers in the city that could challenge the neoliberal agenda of gentrification, privatization, racial repression, and inequality that is driving the city as a whole.

Some challenges to building an education movement for social justice

Based on participating in the struggles against Ren2010 over the past five years and what I have learned from the wisdom of communities and teachers I've been working

in solidarity with around education organizing in the city, I want to suggest four challenges to grapple with in the complex process of forging a social movement to defend public education:

1. Teachers need to build real alliances with communities, especially communities of color and youth.

While some teachers are from and live in the communities they serve and are recognized for their commitment to these communities, many are not. And there are often class differences and contradictions even when teachers and parents are the same race or from same communities. One of the biggest challenges we face is confronting deficit notions of kids and parents and forging real partnerships with parents and communities of color as well as other school employees, cafeteria workers, custodial and office staff, etc. In particular, we need social movement teacher unionism that respects the multiple knowledges in the school community and works together with parents to tackle tough issues, such as how to address the need to discipline or transform racist teachers. This would require building real solidarities by taking on struggles that don't directly affect the union – a process of re-education and building mutual understanding.

2. Need for political education and analysis with a “big P”

To defend public education we need a new politics: one that develops solutions that challenge the neoliberal order broadly. For example, one of the progressive leaders of the LA teachers union proposed reforming the tax structure to address the fiscal crisis of the state which California, like other states, is attempting to solve on the backs of teachers and students. His analysis pointed to the roots of the state's fiscal crisis: military spending, tax cuts for the rich, and he proposed political solutions rooted in new priorities that serve communities. The Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci contended that “every revolution is preceded by an intense labor of criticism.” Our defense of public education will require serious political education to reveal the root causes of the assault on public education, and how it is related to the larger assault on working people and especially communities of color.

3. Challenge of developing a social justice education agenda.

We can't just be against attacks on public education. We have to have a vision and plan for what we are for. The neoliberal restructuring of teaching, particularly corporate management, high stakes testing, accountability, and the language of economic competitiveness, bring to the forefront the question: what is education for? In President Obama's "Educate to Innovate" speech in April 2009, he said, "Our future is on the line. The nation that out-educates us today is going to out-compete us tomorrow. To continue to cede our leadership in education is to cede our position in the world."

I want to argue that we need to separate education from the economy. Education is not the solution to the economic crisis. Uprooting a system based on profit and greed and exploitation is. We need to retrieve the democratic, moral, and social purpose of education. We need real dialogues among parents and students, educators, teacher unions, and school reformers to redirect teaching and curriculum and school governance toward the full development of each individual: rigorous intellectual work, the arts, athletics, the development of critical consciousness (what Paulo Freire called "reading the world"), the capacity and commitment to act with others in society for collective welfare, to build solidarities, to work and live democratically.

4. We can't just be against privatization of public education.

That's where the right wing, the neoliberals, the privatizers win. They claim they are the reformers and we are defenders of the failed status quo. We need to be clear about what we are for. The challenge is to reframe the "public" in public education. In schools, as in other public institutions such as housing, hospitals, we need to acknowledge that the public has not always served everyone well. We need to face up to the fact that the defense of public education may not have much allure for many communities ill-served by public schools. Public education was never open to everyone in the same way. Many of the education struggles of the 1960s and 70s (school desegregation, bilingual education, equal opportunities for girls and women, equitable education for students with disabilities, multicultural education) were waged to pry open gates that excluded many along racial, ethnic, gender, disability, and sexual orientation lines. While victories were won, students of color and other marginalized students are still second class citizens in many public schools through policies, practices, and school cultures. It is this "good sense" that education markets and charter schools appeal to. In fact, neoliberals frame

school choice as self-determination. So the questions are: Whose public? And what kind of public education for what ends?

Conclusion

This is a moment of danger and opportunity. We're in a deep political and economic crisis. There is a lack of leadership which gives an opening for the far right to capitalize on genuine discontent with the economic crisis and the failure of government to meet people's needs rather than give in to Wall Street. It's also an opportunity for disaster capitalism, taking advantage of the crisis to intensify neoliberal economic and social restructuring, which is what we're seeing in education. On the other hand, in the face of the deepest structural crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression and the political stalemate in Washington people are looking for a way out, a new social and economic agenda. An education social movement could play an important role in helping to shape a radically democratic political and economic alternative.

When I asked some of the members of GEM in Chicago for advice on what I should say at a conference on defending public education, a Chicago teacher and union activist advised me to say the following:

Please ask why we have a government that can bail out failing banks and insurance companies but not schools and libraries. Ask why we can over-regulate the schools as we deregulate the financial industry. Ask why the kids and teachers are being used as a scapegoat (or better still a red herring) to keep the public from holding the corporate leaders accountable for the collapse of this economy.

Finally, ask why there are budget deficits across the nation that are being used as an excuse to close schools, fire teachers, increase classroom sizes, and impoverish the curriculum. Perhaps it has something to do with the enormous cost of the war, the trillions of dollars going to bailout the financial corporations, the privatization of public assets, and introducing more middlemen (testing companies and consultants) into the education system. We need this extra layer of technocrats as much as the health industry needs more insurance brokers.