

The "Privatization" of Education

To abandon public schools would renege on our commitment to democratic ideals, severely damage social and political unity, and further divide the haves from the have-nots.

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In the major advanced industrial countries, education has been a largely public enterprise for many years. Schooling, at least between the ages of five and 15, has become a compulsory state-provided service offering everyone access to a supposedly desirable public good. In most of these countries, however, between 5 and 30 percent of children have been educated in the non-public sector.¹ The exact percentage varies since in England, for instance, confessional schools which are considered private in the U.S. are often part of the public sector.

Although "private" education has often had specific social connotations, especially in England, it has generally existed alongside a much larger public system of education offering an increasingly full range of educational opportunities to all school-age children. Only in a few countries, such as the Netherlands, has the major part of compulsory schooling traditionally been delegated to non-public institutions with the aid of massive public subsidies.

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In the past few years, however, a loss of confidence in public enterprises in general, and in state education in particular, has led people in many countries to question the assumption that education is best provided as a compulsory and universal service financed and administered by the state.² In the late 1960s and 70s, the most vociferous crit-

Readers are invited to comment on this article. A variety of viewpoints on the “privatization” of education will appear in the October 1984 issue of *Educational Leadership*.

ics of public education usually came from the political left; today they come increasingly from the “new right.” With governments of the “new right” now in power in Britain and the U.S., the spectre of education as a largely private enterprise has suddenly become a real possibility. So striking is this development in a whole range of countries that the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development recently surveyed its member bodies to discover the true extent of what it termed the “privatization” of education (TUAC, 1982).

The Nature of Privatization

Privatization is a process that takes many forms, some of them more clearly applicable to education than others. In countries with highly developed state industrial or welfare sectors, the attack on public education is presented as part of a wider endeavor to reduce public expenditure and promote the operation of private enterprises in a free market. In those countries that already have, or claim to have, free market conditions in other sectors, the so-called privatization of education is presented as an attempt to bring a particularly overdeveloped state bureaucracy into line with condi-

tions elsewhere. Heald (1983) has identified four components of the general process of privatization:

1. Charging for public services previously paid for out of taxation.
2. Letting the private sector run a service that continues to be paid for out of taxation.
3. Selling public enterprises and transferring their functions to the private sector.
4. Deregulating the private sector or liberalizing arrangements that had prevented the private sector from competing with state-provided services.

Perhaps as important as any of these, at least in the short term, is a fifth trend involving the active use of public money to provide subsidies and encouragement to the private sector at a time when expenditure on services in the public sector is being severely curtailed.

To what extent, then, are these features of a more general movement toward the privatization of state functions manifesting themselves within education? Drawing upon earlier analyses (Pring, 1983; Marginson, 1982), it is possible to identify three strategies in operation: (1) privatization of the public sector, (2) direct subsidies to the private sector, and (3) indirect encouragement of the private sector.

Privatization of the Public Sector

The increase in privatization has a number of separate strands to it. In some cases, parts of public services are actually transferred to the private sector. This can involve the removal of schools from the public sector into the private sector or the handing over of particular services (such as catering) previously performed by state employees to private enterprise. In the latter case, and often even in the former, the service continues to be paid for out of public funds but performed by private operators. Another version of privatization of the public sector is the introduction of charges to clients. Sometimes this is for supposedly peripheral services, such as extra music tuition, but it sets more general precedents and effectively removes these services from the grasp of poorer families. The third strand is the attempt to make the public sector behave more like the private sector by competing for clients in the open market; that is, giving parents a choice of public schools and introducing cross-sector voucher schemes. What



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is perhaps most significant is that these attempts to make the public sector look more like the private sector are going on at a time when the state is actively giving artificial encouragement to the private sector at the expense of the public sector.

Direct Subsidies to the Private Sector

Here, again, we can see a number of strands at work. Clearly the most important is direct state subsidy of the private sector. In Australia, private schools receive vast amounts of public funds, allocated on criteria that have allowed nongovernment schools to flourish, often at the expense of the public sector schools. In England, the charitable status of private schools gives significant tax advantages both to the schools themselves and to families purchasing places within them. The government also pays fees for the children of government servants or for particular categories of pupils considered worthy of assistance.

Government-funded voucher schemes or tuition tax credits, much canvassed recently in the U.S., would provide a further boost to the private sector financed out of public funds.

Indirect Encouragement of the Private Sector

Indirect encouragement of the private sector takes the form of hidden subsidies, official support, and the reduction of the capacity of the public sector to compete with it. In England, for instance, the cost of teacher training is borne by the public, thus saving private institutions from paying the full cost of their operations. Meanwhile, the resources made available to the public sector are being substantially cut back. As well as having a direct effect on the public sector's capacity to compete, the rundown of expenditure on that sector at the same time governments are increasing funding of private schools, contains an important message to parents. In England, the introduction of 'assisted places' in private schools for children of modest means, whose abilities the government claims will not be stretched in the public sector schools, contains a clear implication that the government feels the private sector provides a better education for such pupils and is unwilling to bring public education up to a similar level. In this situation, any parents who can afford to pay private school fees are likely to feel inclined to do so

rather than let their children take their chances in a public school. Many pronouncements by government ministers reinforce this view and this tendency. This is a clear example of official policy helping the private sector to compete on unequal terms with the public sector with a view to enhancing its market appeal in the long term.

As public funds are being used to sponsor the growth of "private" education, the privatization of education has so far occurred more in an ideological sense than in a budgetary one. Indeed, one has to ask whether the growing private sector can continue to be called "private" when it relies so heavily for its funding on the public purse despite its limited degree of public accountability.

The Purposes of Privatization

Having mapped out some of the tendencies towards a privatization of the education system, we need to ask what it is all for and whether it is likely to have the desired effects.

Clearly a great deal of the argument for privatization is tied up with the principles of monetarist economic and social theory. Although this partly involves the budgetary aim of reducing the ratio of government to nongovernment expenditure in the economy, the applicability of this to education seems limited, at least in the short term. More important is the broader aim of giving private individuals control over their own lives. In this ideological sense, the "private" in privatization signals two related preferences, the one involving the favoring of private rather than public enterprises, the other the restoration of decisions that have been made by professional experts over the past few decades to the individuals whose lives are involved. It is the latter "populist" strand that gives privatization policies their greatest appeal to the electorate.

The espousal of the twin goods of individual freedom and market forces is, however, not purely ideological in that they are also seen to offer the best chance of serving long-term national interests. Within the economic field, they are seen to hold the best chance of growth once the fat has been trimmed from the public sphere and competition restored to the private. In the educational context, they are expected to produce schools which, through their responsiveness to choices made by parents in

the market, are more likely than those administered by state bureaucracies to produce high levels of scholastic achievement, thus serving individual and national interests.

Will Privatization Work?

Of course, we don't know what the effect of a largely "privatized" system of education would actually be. We can only make more or less informed guesses on the basis of what we do know of the performance of the system where private education remains a minority pursuit. The continuing controversy over Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore's *High School Achievement* (1982) demonstrates just how difficult this is. It does, however, seem to be the case that the various proposals to stimulate use of the private sector, such as voucher schemes and tuition tax credits, are unlikely to provide any significant benefit to those disadvantaged by the present educational system in the absence of broader changes in the nature of society (Apple, 1982; Catterall and Levin, 1982).³ If this is so, the claims by those who work in the private sector, or already use it at their own expense, that greater public encouragement of it would benefit the population as a whole are at least questionable. A few individuals and particular interest groups, such as small religious sects, would no doubt gain some particular benefit from these developments, but the prospects for the mass of those currently disadvantaged would not look any brighter under a "privatized" system. Indeed, its limitations might even put them at a greater disadvantage.

The Limits to Privatization

The rolling back of the state, the privatization of public services, and the return of welfare responsibilities to the family certainly feed on a powerful romantic myth about a better past before the state took on responsibilities for such services. As such, these proposals have an appeal not only to those who can function quite effectively without such public provision and would benefit from greater state aid to the private sector, but also to those disadvantaged groups for whom public provision has never really fulfilled its promise of equality of opportunity. For them the notion that what is at fault is inhuman unresponsive state bureaucracies, rather than an inherently unjust social system, has some appeal.

Indeed, it is upon this that the political parties of the 'new right' have been able to capitalize with a claim that a restoration of individual choice in the free market, far from being in conflict with the principle of social justice, is actually the best way of achieving it.

However although the case for a return to market forces in education may not be entirely disingenuous, we will not in fact see anything like a total privatization of the education service, even leaving aside the question of funding. Even many of those advocating a return of education and welfare services to the market in the name of broader monetarist policies argue for the continued existence of a so-called safety net of public provision for those unable or unwilling to compete in the market. In other words, publicly administered and funded education is likely to remain with us, but as a distinctly 'second-class' service.

The Dangers of Privatization

It is in this dual system of educational provision that we find the real dangers facing the concept of an educational service aspiring to equal opportunity for all. It is here that the lie is given to the idea that the exercise of individual freedom is intended to benefit all. Though the notion of collective universal provision by the state through public sector educational institutions has also not achieved equality of opportunity (Halsey and others, 1980), it has potentially provided a context in which all can aspire to the best, whatever their personal circumstances. Privatization not only threatens the negative conception of collectivism associated with inhuman welfare state bureaucracies; it also constitutes an attack on the very notion that collective action, rather than the individual exercise of supposedly free choice in an unequal society, is the best way of achieving social justice. This idea has provided, however imperfectly, a service around which groups opposed to the injustices of the present system could combine to fight for gains that individually they could never hope to win.

The monetarist vision of supplying education and other services through the market, with a small but impoverished public service for those unable to compete, is potentially much more damaging for disadvantaged groups in society than even the mass public provision of the past 30 years. It is likely to have particularly dire consequences for those living in the inner cities. For not only will they be unable to attain access

to educational and welfare provision beyond a bare minimum provided by the state, they will increasingly become the only groups receiving this form of public provision. They will thus be further divided from the working class as a whole and will lack the collective strength and the opportunities for broader alliances around education to improve upon the thinly disguised exercise in social control that public provision will once again come to involve. Just as within housing provision, where different forms of tenure divide the working class against itself (Saunders, 1980), so will the divisions now being recreated within education have the same effect. When linked to differential patterns of employment and welfare provision, this will exacerbate the already strong tendency toward development of an underclass of minorities increasingly separated from and in conflict with the mass of the working class and its political movements. If this is nothing new, especially in the U.S., we should nevertheless think twice about supporting developments that will take such tendencies even further.

Those of us in public education certainly have to face up to the fact that our ideals have often not been met by the operation of that service. Much of our work has not produced the benefits we envisaged for the major disadvantaged groups in our society—whether we mean the working class, women, or various ethnic minorities. Indeed, probably the greatest beneficiaries of Haveck's so-called "swollen state" of the 1950s and 60s were the white middle-class welfare and education professionals rather than these disadvantaged groups. To this extent, defense of the public sector can all too easily be seen as purely self-serving. However, the consequences of the dismantling of that service need to be considered extremely carefully insofar as it may remove for the foreseeable future any possibility for the genuine enhancement of social justice through collective action.

Conclusion

Public educators genuinely committed to social justice should heed the American evidence to the TUAC survey, which argued that:

The plans for the privatization of education go against the principle that there is public purpose for education, that education is a public good, and that education policies should be determined through a public policy-making process. There is reasonable concern that special interest groups would promote their own sectarian interests through

publicly supported private schools which would severely weaken social and political cohesion in the United States (TUAC, 1982).

At the same time, it is important to recognize that, for the present, public education fails to serve the majority of its clients and hence makes them potential supporters of reactionary proposals. As public educators, it is time we made common cause with those consistently disadvantaged groups to fight for an education and a society that actually gives them what in theory it promises. In other words, we should not be looking to dismantle public education but rather to make it do what it says in the context of a broader collective struggle for the achievement of social justice. □

The situation is complicated by the fact in England the most prestigious private schools, such as Eton, Harrow and Winchester, are called "public schools." However, in this paper, I have ignored this eccentricity of the English and I use the term "public" to refer to institutions financed and administered by the state.

By "state" here, I refer to bodies at all levels of government—local, state, and federal. The administration of education resides at different levels of the state apparatus in different countries.

Even Coleman and others (1982) found that non-Catholic private schools in the U.S. were less successful than the public schools in eliminating the differential effects of social background.

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