

## GUEST COLUMN

# Privatizing education is an injustice that needs to stop

**Ed Eiler**

For the Journal & Courier

“There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest” — Elie Wiesel.

Three recent news worthy items deserve our attention. The first is a recent study in the American Educational Research Journal. The study concluded that rising income inequality in the U.S. is a primary cause of the growing economic segregation of schools. As the gap grows between rich and poor, affluent families are more likely to segregate themselves into enclaves where there are few poor children in the public schools.

The second is a report issued by the Indiana Department of Education that calculated the net increased cost for the state’s education voucher program to be \$53.2 million. Some 52 percent of voucher students now have no record of attending a public school.

The final report is one completed by the National Conference of State Legislatures addressing educational reform. The report acknowledges there are no silver bullets and the present efforts at reform have failed. The report recognizes the importance of having all stakeholders be a part of the process of improving our schools.

Why does any of this matter? All of these reports can be tied to the effort to privatize education.

In his book, “Justice,” Michael Sandell makes the observation that during the past 30 years we have moved from being a market economy to a market society where increasingly everything is being turned into a commodity and is for sale to the highest bidder. Sandell contends that when dealing with material goods, a market economy is a valuable and productive tool, but we should not trust markets with our civic lives. He observes that economists assume markets are inert and do not touch or taint the goods they exchange. This assumption may be true of material goods, but may not be true for nonmaterial goods and social practices related to education, health care, politics, law and civic life.

Should educational opportunities be made available based upon the ability to pay? Should we pay children to read books or get good grades? Should people receive health care on the basis of their ability to pay? Should access to politicians and the political system be governed by those who have more money? Should legal representation be impacted by one’s financial circumstances? Should you be able to pay someone else to take your place in serving your country?

Should citizenship be for sale?

Sandell asserts markets may in fact undermine or crowd out nonmarket attitudes and values worth caring about and change the character of some goods and social

practices. He writes that the most corrosive effect of markets is the loss of our commonality – “we’re all in it together.”

The American public school system has been where students of different economic classes, religious backgrounds and ethnic communities come together to develop a sense of community and a commitment to the common good.

Because of income inequality, we are increasingly leading separate lives. Sandell asserts, “Democracy doesn’t demand absolute equality, but does require people to share a common life.”

Sandell concludes that ultimately this is “... not an economic question. The question is how do we want to live together? Do we want a society where everything is up for sale or are there certain moral and civic goods that markets do not honor and money cannot buy?”

That is why all of this matters, why we should oppose privatizing our schools and why we should elect people who support our public schools. I may be powerless to prevent it, but the privatization of education is an injustice, and I must protest.

*Eiler is former superintendent of Lafayette School Corp.*



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