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DOERR'S WAY

The Pearl-Harboring of American Public Education

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Nine out ten kids in America attended, now attend, or will attend public schools. Yet what we might correctly term the “Pearl-Harboring” of public education rates little mention in the media, print or electronic. The facts are there for anyone who bothers to pay attention. We might note that K–12 public schools cost taxpayers more than \$500 billion per year, a nice chunk of change that both entrepreneurs and clericalists are salivating to dip into.

The four main faces of the Pearl-Harboring are:

- inadequate and inequitably distributed public school funding;
- decades-long campaigns by clericalist and other special interests to have the federal and state governments divert public funds to private schools, the vast majority of them connected to churches, through vouchers, tax credits, or education savings accounts;
- the more-recent movement led by alleged school “reformers” to have government support charter schools that, though publicly supported, are rarely responsible to taxpayers or elected school boards; and
- media inattention to real public schools and their varied problems and the failure to adequately report what is going on.

According to the *New York Times* (August 29), the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities reported that “as of last year, twenty-five states were spending less per student than before the recession, adjusted for inflation, and cuts in seven states exceeded 10 percent. In thirty-one states, local government spending per student fell between 2008 and 2014.” In mid-August, the Economic Policy Institute reported that “teachers’ pay continues to fall relative to pay for comparable workers. Teachers made 17 percent less in wages than similar workers in 2015.” This is in addition to the fact that spending on public education is very uneven, tending to favor well-off white students over poorer and minority ones. Meanwhile, increasing amounts of public funds are being diverted to private schools that serve proportionately fewer poor and minority students than regular public schools. Let’s note also that more than 20 percent of students in public schools are afflicted by poverty and that about half of public-school students qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches.

Adding insult to injury, the National Labor Relations Board ruled on August 24 that charter schools, though supported by taxes extracted from all taxpayers, are not “really” public schools—despite the fact that some states, such as New York, describe charter schools as existing “within the public school system.” So, although it quacks like a duck and walks like a duck—sort of—it *ain’t* really a duck.

Turning to vouchers and other gimmicks for siphoning public funds to private schools, we note that about twenty states operate such schemes, despite ample evidence that American voters have long been strongly opposed. Few people seem aware that over the past fifty years, millions of voters have rejected such misuse of the treasury in twenty-seven state referenda by an average two-to-one majority.*

In the only deviation from this trend, South Dakota in a 1986 referendum approved a small textbook-loan program by 54 to 46 percent, but in 2004 the state's voters rejected a larger "auxiliary services" plan by 53 to 47 percent.

The respected 2015 Gallup/PDK education poll showed that the public rejects diversion of public funds to private schools by 57 percent to 31 percent, similar to what Gallup surveys have found for fifty years.

In mid-September, the U.S. Government Accounting Office (GAO) released its study of twenty school-voucher programs, especially in the states of Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Arizona, which account for half of all voucher programs and two-thirds of all voucher students. Among the GAO's findings:

- tax monies to fund vouchers come from the public-school funding stream;
- voucher programs are generally weak on student demographics;
- most voucher-aided private schools charge tuition above and beyond the value of the voucher;
- most voucher-aided schools may be and are selective along various lines;
- the vast majority of voucher-aided schools are connected to religious denominations;
- voucher students have fewer rights and less access to special education programs.

The GAO study does not discuss the generally pervasive religious nature of the voucher-aided schools.

As Indiana has become one of the leading voucher states—thanks to Republican governors Mitch Daniels and Mike Pence and Republican legislatures—we might look at the list of private schools approved for voucher aid listed by the Indiana Department of Education on July 11, 2016: Catholic, 154; evangelical Christian, 60; Lutheran, 38; Islamic, 4; Seventh-day Adventist, 3; Jewish, 2; Baptist, 2; Presbyterian, 1. There are about a dozen more whose religious or nonreligious status is unclear. Indiana's Supreme Court has upheld the voucher legislation, despite the fact that it appears to conflict with Article 1, Sections 4 and 6 of the state constitution.

It should be noted that the very first flow of voucher aid was to segregated Christian academies in the South in the wake of the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* that declared public-school segregation unconstitutional. The court in the 1960s and 1970s held that discriminatory private schools are not eligible for tax-exempt status.

Now, on to charter schools, an idea first advocated around 1990 by teacher-union head Al Shanker. He envisioned them as experimental schools, controlled by local school-boards and working with local public schools. But as soon as charters took off in the early 1990s, they largely turned into Mary Shelley Frankenstein monsters. Over three million students now attend charter schools, which are generally rather opaque and rarely answerable to elected public boards. The 2014 Stanford University CREDO study reported that nearly 40 percent of charters are worse than regular public schools, while fewer than 20 percent are any better, which generally results from their various forms of selectivity, such as their "counseling out" special needs kids and their advertising methods. Special interests, assorted profiteers, and foundations such as the Walton and Broad outfits have been pouring many millions of dollars into vast campaigns to promote charters and vouchers.

Charters are rife with scandals too numerous and pervasive to list. They are rarely reported in the general media but featured almost daily in the blogs of prominent educator/author Diane Ravitch, Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding leader William Phillis, Mercedes Schneider, and others.

Where does public opinion stand on all this? Thanks to the annual Gallup/PDK education polls, we have forty-two years of polling on the matter, 1974 through 2016. When asked the identical question every year, about 70 percent of respondents nationwide (2016 poll) give the public school attended by their oldest child an A or B grade, with 10 percent or less giving a D or F grade. When respondents were asked to assign a letter grade to public schools “in your community,” the total number of As and Bs hovered around 48 percent (2016). When asked to grade public schools “in the nation as a whole,” only about 24 percent (2016) gave As and Bs. Over the forty years in which the same questions were used, the results have stayed remarkably stable. This obviously means that most Americans think well of the public schools they know best (the ones attended by their own children), while nationally they swallow the propaganda spewed ceaselessly by the assorted moneyed interests unfriendly to public schools.

We also have the forty years of Gallup education polling on “What do you think are the biggest problems facing the public schools in your community? Open end, allow up to 3 responses.” Leading the poll this year is “Funding” at 19 percent, with “Discipline” and “Violence” at 9 percent and 8 percent, respectively. The “biggest problem” results have varied widely over the forty years, but funding and discipline have remained prominent. Drugs used to be a concern until fifteen years ago, while concern about discipline has faded from mid-20 percent before 1990 to less than 10 percent since 2011.

As a former teacher of history, government, and Spanish who has or has had six close relatives in the teaching profession and who has been involved full-time with public education issues for sixty years, I readily accept the fact that our public schools have problems. Leading the list are inadequate and inequitably distributed funding; classes that are too large; inadequate pre-school education, especially for disadvantaged kids; inadequate wraparound social and medical services; over-testing begun during the Bush administration; and our society’s failure to deal adequately with the poverty that afflicts a larger percentage of our population than is the case in nearly all other advanced countries. All this is compounded by media, political, and public indifference to public-education issues and the endless activity of conservative and financial interests.

Time is running out. If Americans do not get their act together and rally behind our public schools, our whole society will be irrevocably damaged. Strong, properly funded secular (that is, religiously neutral) public schools are indispensable for protecting and advancing our liberties and democratic government. Too many people take for granted clean air and waste disposal, police and fire protection, safe roads and bridges—and public schools. This is a crisis for *all* Americans.

* Here are the referendum states and dates: Alaska, 1976; California, 1982, 1993, 2000; Colorado, 1992, 1998; District of Columbia, 1981; Florida, 2012; Idaho, 1976; Hawaii, 2014; Massachusetts, 1982, 1986; Maryland, 1972, 1974; Michigan, 1970, 1978, 2000; Missouri, 1976; Nebraska, 1970; New York, 1967 (the subject of my 1968 book, *The Conspiracy That Failed*); Oregon, 1972, 1990; South Dakota, 2004; Utah, 1988, 2007; Washington, 1975, 1996.

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