

Research Briefs

Title

Privatization and Public Education Systems

Background

Generally speaking privatization transfers an industry or service from public oversight to private interest. Privatization in education systems has emerged around the world as a neoliberal concept that champions notions of parental choice and personalization of learning. It is a concept that is fundamentally rooted in ideologies that advance competition and the standardization of education.

Critics of privatization argue that services such as healthcare, law enforcement, and education should be in the public sector to ensure greater regulation, accountability, assurance and equitable access by all members of society. Key academic researchers view private, commercial interests in education as threatening equity, the public school system, the future of the profession of teaching and democracy (Cortez 2013). The road to privatization of public education is well defined, namely defund what you want to privatize. The “standard technique of privatization: defund, make sure things don’t work, people get angry, you hand it over to private capital” (Chomsky 2011).

The research and debates over private schooling versus public schooling primarily centre on issues of economics, equity and accessibility (Adamson et al., 2016). In Alberta, 15 elite private schools charge tuition of more than \$10,000 CAD a year (some reaching \$20,000 CAD per annum) while receiving 70 per cent of their per-student operational funding from the Government of Alberta. Alberta has the highest taxpayer contributions to private schools of anywhere in Canada. Proponents of privatization claim that it promotes competition, fosters more efficient practices, improves quality of education, and creates greater choice and access for parents and students. They also argue that it takes the financial burden off the state, leading to services at lower costs (Patrinos et al., 2009).

School Choice

The movement toward charter schools and voucher programs is inextricably linked to privatization, and is viewed by an increasing number of scholars with deep concerns and skepticism. School choice is a key selling point of charter schools and vouchers; yet, parental choice differs from student opportunity (Menashy 2013). The notion of school choice, in particular, is critiqued in the research as model that diminishes educational accessibility and creates greater social inequalities:

Choice . . . is a concept that should not be confused with agency, or opportunity. . . . If human well-being were to be assessed on a person’s choices, then all must have equality of choice. However, in the case of, for instance, low-fee private schools, only those families with means to pay the fees are able to enjoy this choice. (Menashy 2013, pp 20–21).

A report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012, 64) similarly argues that, rather than promoting “high quality schooling for all,” “choice and associated market mechanisms can enhance segregation.” Examining equity—a criterion of social justice—in the Netherlands, Henry M Levin et al. (2013, 526–27) conclude that prevailing inequities stem from the country’s education voucher program, “where parents choose schools that mirror their own religion, ethnicity and socio-economic identities.”

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Ravitch (2014, 178) characterises the charter movement as “a vehicle for privatization of large swaths of public education.” More notably—because it challenges another argument for private interests in education—the success of charter schools and voucher programs is, at best, inconsistent (Berliner, Glass and Associates 2014; Carey 2017), and research shows little correlation between the competition promoted by privatization and academic achievement (Ellison 2012).

Key strategic considerations

Public education systems become privatized over time through a standard technique: defund public schools, increase class sizes, reduce supports for inclusion and de-professionalize teachers. The public then gets angry at the public schools and teachers because “things don't work,” triggering public resources and funding to be handed over to private schools and their interests, which do not necessarily serve the public interest.

Sources and further reading

References

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- Patrinos, H, F Barrera-Osorio and J Guaqueta. 2009. *The Role and Impact of Public–Private Partnerships in Education*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Ravitch, D. 2014. *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*. New York: Knopf.

Networks

- *Education International: Unite for Quality Education* <https://www.unite4education.org/>
- *University of Colorado: National Education Policy Centre* <https://nepc.colorado.edu/topic/privatization>
- *Columbia University, Teachers College: National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education* <https://ncspe.tc.columbia.edu/>
- *Canadian Teachers' Federation, Alberta Teachers' Association, Education International: We The Educators* <https://wetheeducators.com/>
- *Alberta Teachers' Association: What We Think, Policy* <https://www.teachers.ab.ca>

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