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Flip the Script

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Flip the Script

Kevin K. Kumashiro & Erica R. Meiners

In Chicago, after much speculation, in July 2011 our new mayor Rahm Emanuel stated that his three teenaged children would attend the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. Emanuel buffered criticism with the hetero-patriarchal family screen. This was a father's decision, he stated, and "politics can't play into the decisions he makes for his family" (Associated Press, 2011).

Karen Lewis, the president of the Chicago Teachers Union, called it "wonderful" that Emanuel has the option to choose a school with small class sizes, vibrant curriculum, and a teacher and an assistant in every classroom. The UC Lab Schools are apparently fabulous. President Obama's daughters attended before transferring to Sidwell Friends School in Washington, DC, where the 2011-2012 tuition for high school is \$32,960 but this includes a hot lunch. Some of our best friends laud the UC Lab Schools for the massive resources at their children's disposal, the diversity of the faculty and student body, and the positive learning environment created by the staff. Teachers are unionized, earning among the highest teaching salaries in the state, and student rates of graduation and attending post-secondary education are enviable. The 2011-2012 price tag at the UC Lab Schools: \$24,870 a year for a grade 9-12 student (Tuition, n.d.). Money matters.

Money—and naming the impact of massive wealth differentials in the United States—often gets trivialized or disappeared in debates about how best to reform public schools (Gilson & Perot, 2011). And therein lays a central contradiction about school reform: a high tuition bill is logical and a father's choice for restrictive-admission private schools, but the impact of poverty and equalizing access to resources is generally off the table in discussions about struggling public schools. This contradiction is reflected in the work of Penny Pritzker, whose children attended UC Lab Schools where she now serves as a board member, and she is also a member of Chicago's appointed, not elected, public school board. In the summer of 2011 Pritzker, also the national finance chair in the 2008 Obama presidential campaign, led the charge to raise millions of dollars to support the anti-union advocacy group, Stand for Children, in its successful initiative to advance legislation that, among other things, scapegoated teachers and teachers' unions and weakened collective bargaining rights in Illinois (Long, 2011).

Organizations like Stand for Children are at the forefront of a movement of wealthy Americans to drum into public consciousness the notion that schools and student performance, always measured by standardized tests, would improve if we just held those bad, overwhelmingly female, teachers accountable. Media coverage of evil unions that protect veteran teacher's rights while stamping out the light of better (and often whiter) newer (and cheaper) teachers has catapulted teachers' unions to public educational enemy number one.

Why should we squander money on those lazy teachers, protected by corrupt unions, who are not doing their job? Scapegoating teachers and teachers' unions conveniently legitimates less public fiscal

investment in education and distracts us from challenging our nation's priorities and redistributing wealth.

We push back on the seductive rhetoric of the fiscal crisis that continues to justify all kinds of restructuring. While state educational coffers stagnate, decrease, or are tied to more punitive accountability regimes, other publicly financed industries grow. While violent crime rates continued to decrease, between 1984 and 2000, across all states and the District of Columbia, spending on prisons was 6 times the increase of spending on higher education (Justice Policy, 2002). In Illinois, between 1985 and 2000 the state's budget for higher education increased by 30% while the budget for corrections increased more than 100% (Clark, Janicheck, & Kane-Willis, 2006). The United States also deports more people a day than ever before, at a cost of \$18,310 per apprehension, a figure that does not include detention and other processing costs (Fitz, Martinez, & Wijewardena, 2010). The federal government spends 58% of the discretionary budget on military-related expenditures (National Priorities, 2011). The nation's priorities are clear.

Propelled by federal policy, anti-union legislation, and the demonization of unions and teachers in the media, the current dismal state of affairs almost reads like a recipe: How to Dismantle Public Education.

First, produce failure

The goal in No Child Left Behind of achieving 100% proficiency in reading and mathematics by the year 2014 is a rate that has not been achieved by any other nation. The goal may purport to raise standards, but by raising the bar to unachievable levels, and then punishing those who fail, NCLB actually sets up schools to fail.

Second, blame teachers

If students are not learning, it is because teachers are not teaching, right? Common sense tells us that education is all about the teacher, hence the media's love-affair with the stand-out teacher, and the unchallenged presumption that there are too many incompetent teachers, protected by unions, and prepared by mediocre teacher-certification programs. Are some teachers ineffective? Surely, just as in any other profession. But this focus on the individual masks the bigger picture, especially the more structural aspects of public education that can help to explain why disparities persist.

Third, force competition

If teachers are not trying hard enough, then we should introduce more competition from the private sector, because like grocery stores in a neighborhood, competition will force innovation and effort, and only the best will profit. The result is a dramatically increasing amount of public funds going to the private sector, giving the haves even more, and the have-nots, even less. Privatization, in other words, exacerbates educational disparities.

Where there is power there is always resistance. We write as the “occupation” of Wall Street hits its third week and the motley crew camped out is joined daily by unions, students, anti-poverty, queer and faith groups, and spreads across the nation. Whether this flourishes or not, the message is loud and clear: we must flip the script. What is the real crisis? According to the most recent U.S. Census, 1 in 6 Americans lives in poverty (Tavernise, 2011). Communities and cities are hyper-segregated (Population Studies, 2011). We have money for a permanent war, border policing, and Wall Street bailouts, but empty hands and cutbacks for schools and healthcare.

Our national myopic obsession with individuated school failure distracts us from the bigger pictures. Emanuel and Pritzker made the choice to send their children to school where the sticker price exceeds what the federal government thinks a family of four should be able to live on for a year. What is the real message? Excellence is available for those who can afford to participate in the tax-free and publicly subsidized educational privatopias (but, even if you could pay the tuition bill, admission is restricted, not guaranteed, as in public education). The political choice those in power suggest for other families across Chicago is not to fight for the redistribution of these resources and the life pathways associated with this wealth. Instead, the working-poor majority are instructed to keep Waiting for Superman.

We push back, like all social movements, because we know that the work to build a participatory and non-punishing democracy must be done again. And again. And again. In the past few months, from Argentina to Canada to the Dominican Republic to Egypt to France to Honduras to India to Kenya to Mexico to the UK, teachers and other workers have gone on strike, demanding that we see the bigger picture, insisting on flipping the script. In the United States, teachers join with activists from all walks of life, on Wall Street and beyond, to call attention to the warped priorities of our nation’s leaders and policies.

Three lessons from the Wall Street protests:

Name the problem. Draw connections to the bigger picture and challenge the constructedness of the fiscal crisis. Refuse to scapegoat the “usual suspects” and raise critical questions about the official explanations or the common sense. (see Image 1, “Name the Problem”)

Rethink the solution. Rather than dismantle the public sector or support our continued transformation into a punishment state, we must invest in, and work to strengthen, the welfare and supportive arms of the state, not the carceral tentacles. Why continue to naturalize the prison and military industrial complexes? Why not build the educational-justice, flourishing-wage, art-and-peace-garden complexes? (see Image 2, “Rethink the Solution”)

Jump into the movement. Collectivize. Consolidate sectors. Build coalitions and a broader social movement. (see Image 3, “Jump into the Movement”)

We must flip the script about public education. The problem is not the unavailability of funding or the rabid incompetence of all teachers, but rather, our flawed priorities and our unwillingness to name and address the significant and underlying causes for educational inequity. The solution is not the marketizing and privatizing of public education and the punishment of teachers, parents and children when they fail to perform well on narrow standardized tests. We require a redistribution of wealth and access to resources. We need authentic investments in just and researched educational transformations that don't leave anyone, including those who qualify as children, behind. The people who will make this happen are not supermen, billionaire hedge funders, philanthropic educational do-gooders or charismatic politicians. Each one of us must understand education reform as inseparable from our concurrent struggles in other sectors, including labor and healthcare, and the movements to secure full human and civil rights for all. We need to Occupy our classrooms, our PTAs, our boards of education, our legislatures, our chambers of commerce, our faith communities, and our media, to insist on ethical and just support to rebuild public education. Now.

Image 1: "Name the Problem"



Image 2: "Rethink the Solution"



Image 3: "Jump into the Movement"



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