

Connecting the dots: The "new mindset" we confront

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One of the most deceptive aspects of neoliberal reforms in education is that destructive policies often contain one element that is seductive for progressives who care about inequality in schools. When the Dems and Republicans rewrote federal aid to K-12 schools in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) many liberal researchers were dazzled by the legislation's requirement that schools and states report data on student achievement broken down (disaggregated) by race. This was no small change, as I learned when I analyzed student achievement in New York City for a study of school reforms being touted as a cure for underachievement. The political price we paid for this data has been imposition of a punishing regime of standardized testing, which has provided the rationale for massive school closings and privatization of education. What we should have learned from NCLB is to connect the dots, to look at the entire picture, understanding that the rhetoric obscures the aims, and any real benefit is tangential to the project's purpose.

When I talk to audiences about the neoliberal project, I use the 1999 quote from "The book of knowledge," a Merrill Lynch report that calls for a "new mindset" that sees schools as "retail outlets," parents and students as "customers," and school boards as "customer service departments." It is this "new mindset" that we must defeat. When we look at the evidence, when we connect the dots, especially the global picture, what's apparent is that we face a project that aims to create a new, global system of education that will synchronize education with capitalism's economic demands. In every case the language and result of the policy contradict its effects.

Proponents of this project use the rhetoric of making schools more equal to increase inequality in outcomes. The public sector is subject to staggering regulation and starved of resources while private programs (funded by right-wing "vulture" philanthropy) are freed from the most minimal oversight. The project cites lofty goals of improving teacher quality to deskill and deprofessionalize teaching, pushing Teach for America, a program that puts minimally prepared novices into the schools that require the best-trained faculty. Slogans about holding all students to "world class" standards to push adoption of a national curriculum (Common Core) mask the effects this will have. Without massively increased funding, not even a well-tested curriculum (which Common Core is not) would fail. Developed by a private consortium supported by the Gates Foundation, without parent, teacher, or citizen participation, the Common Core will be a disaster used to justify further privatization. Poor test scores based on this uniform new curriculum will be the excuse to fire thousands of teachers and push tens of thousands of young people of color out of schools, into a jobless future or prison and convict labor.

Connecting the dots clarifies that we have to defeat this project. It's a tsunami created by wealthy elites that aim to destroy public education and with it the ideals of public education that support a democracy.

I invite reader comments, either on this website or to me directly at drweinerlo@gmail.com. Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. And you can follow my thoughts on teaching, schools, and education on twitter , Facebook, as well as my blog here at New Politics.