

THIS MUST END NOW:

Educators & Scholars of Color Against Failed Educational “Reforms”

The public is being misled. Billionaire philanthropists are increasingly foisting so-called “reform” initiatives upon the schools that serve predominantly students of color and low-income students, and are using black and brown voices to echo claims of improving schools or advancing civil rights in order to rally community support. However, the evidence to the contrary is clear: these initiatives have not systematically improved student success, are faulty by design, and have already proven to widen racial and economic disparities. We must heed the growing body of research and support communities and civil-rights organizations in their calls for a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the problems facing our schools, a retreat from failed “reforms,” and better solutions.

- ***Our school systems need more public investment, not philanthropic experimentation; more democratic governance, not disenfranchisement; more guidance from the profession, the community, and researchers, not from those looking to privatize and profiteer; and more attention to legacies of systemic injustice, racism, and poverty, not neoliberal, market-based initiatives that function merely to incentivize, blame, and punish.***
- ***Our teachers and leaders need more, better, and ongoing preparation and support, more professional experience and community connections, and more involvement in shared governance and collective bargaining for the common good, not less.***
- ***Our vision should be that every student receives the very best that our country has to offer as a fundamental right and a public good; not be forced to compete in a marketplace where some have and some have not, and where some win and many others lose.***

The offer for “help” is alluring, and is reinforced by Hollywood’s long history of deficit-oriented films about white teachers saving poorer black and brown students from suffering, as if the solution consisted merely of uplifting and inspiring individuals, rather than of tackling the broader system of stratification that functions to fail them in the first place. Today, more than ever before, the “help” comes in the form of contingent financing, and the pressure to accept is intense: shrinking public resources, resounding claims of scarcity, and urgent calls for austerity make it seem negligent to turn down sizable financial incentives, even when such aid is tied to problematic reforms.

The growing number of funders includes high-profile foundations and obscure new funders (including but not limited to the Arnold Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Bradley Foundation, Broad Foundation, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, City Fund, DeVos family foundations, Gates Foundation, Koch family foundations, and Walton Family Foundation), and for the most part, have converged on what counts as worthwhile and fundable, whether leaning conservative or liberal, Republican or Democrat (see, for example, the platform of Democrats for Education Reform). Such funders may also be supporting some grassroots initiatives, but overall, mega-philanthropy in public education exemplifies the 21st-century shift from traditional donating that supported others’ initiatives with relatively smaller grants, to venture financing that offers funding pools of unprecedented size and scale but only to those who agree to implement the funders’ experiments. Belying the rhetoric of improving schools is the reality that such experiments are making struggling schools look less and less like the top performing schools for the elite, and do so by design, as with the following:

The Portfolio Model

Exemplified in the early 2000s by the turnaround-school reforms in Chicago Public Schools and Race to the Top, and increasingly shaping urban districts across the country today, the “portfolio model” decentralizes decision making, expands school choice, holds schools accountable through performance measures like student testing, and sanctions failing schools with closure or restructuring, incentivizing their replacements in the form of charter schools. This model purports that marketizing school systems will lead to system improvement, and that student testing carries both validity and reliability for high-stakes decisions, neither of which is true.

Instead of improving struggling schools, what results are growing racial disparities that fuel gentrification for the richer alongside disinvestment from the poorer. The racially disparate outcomes should not be surprising, given the historical ties between standardized testing and eugenics, and even today, given the ways that “norm referencing” in test construction guarantees the perpetuation of a racialized achievement curve. Yet, the hallmarks of the portfolio model are taught in the Broad Superintendents Academy that prepares an increasingly steady flow of new leaders for urban districts, and not surprisingly, that has produced the leaders that have been ousted in some of the highest profile protests by parents and teachers in recent years. This is the model that propels the funding and incubation of school-choice expansion, particularly via charter schools, through such organizations as the NewSchools Venture Fund and various charter networks whose leaders are among the trainers in the Broad Academy. Imposing this model on poorer communities of color is nefarious, disingenuous, and must end.

Choice, Vouchers, Charters

The expansion of school choice, including vouchers (and neo-voucher initiatives, like tax credits) and charter schools, purports to give children and parents the freedom to leave a “failing” school. However, the research on decades of such programs does not give compelling evidence that such reforms lead to system improvement, instead showing increased racial segregation, diversion of public funding from the neediest of communities, neglect of students with disabilities and English-language learners, and more racial disparities in educational opportunity. This should not be surprising: choice emerged during the Civil Rights Movement as a way to resist desegregation; vouchers also emerged during this time, when the federal government was growing its investment into public education, as a way to privatize public school systems and divert funding to private schools for the elite; and charter schools emerged in the 1990s as laboratories for communities to shape their own schools, but have become the primary tool to privatize school systems.

Yes, choice and vouchers give some students a better education, but in many areas, students of color and low-income students are in the minority of those using vouchers. Yes, some charters are high performing, but overall, the under-regulation of and disproportionate funding for charter schools has resulted in hundreds of millions of tax dollars in waste (and even more in corporate profits) that could otherwise have gone to traditional public schools. The NAACP was right when it resolved that privatization is a threat to public education, and in particular, called for a moratorium on charter-school expansion; and the NAACP, MALDEF, ACLU, and other national civil-rights organizations have opposed voucher expansion. Diverting funds towards vouchers, neo-vouchers, and charters must end.

Teacher Deprofessionalization

The deprofessionalization of teaching—including the undermining of collective bargaining and shared governance, and the preferential hiring of underprepared teachers—is foregrounded in charter schools (which often prohibit unionization and hire a disproportionate number of Teach for America teachers), but affects the teaching force in public schools, writ large. The mega-philanthropies are not only anti-union, having supported (sometimes rhetorically, sometimes resourcefully) the recent wave of anti-union bills across the states; but more broadly, are anti-shared governance, supporting the shift toward top-down management forms (including by for-profit management entities at the school level, and unelected, mayor-appointed boards at the district level).

The weakening of the profession is also apparent in the philanthropies' funding of fast-track routes to certification, not only for leaders (like with New Leaders for New Schools), but also for classroom teachers, like with the American Board for Certification of Teaching Excellence, and more notably, Teach for America (TFA). TFA accelerates the revolving door of teachers by turning teaching into a brief service obligation, justified by a redefining of quality teacher away from preparedness, experience, and community connectedness to merely being knowledgeable of subject matter (and notably, after the courts found that TFA teachers did not meet the definition of "highly qualified," Congress would remove the requirement that every student have a "highly qualified" teacher in its 2015 reauthorization of ESEA, thus authorizing the placement of underprepared teachers in the neediest of schools).

Parents are being lied to when told that these "reforms" of weakening unions and lessening professional preparation will raise the quality of teachers for their children. Yes, some teachers and leaders from alternative routes are effective and well-intended, but outliers should not drive policy. Students are being lied to when told that choosing such pathways is akin to joining the legacy of civil-rights struggles for poorer communities of color. Not surprisingly, the NAACP and the Movement for Black Lives have called out how initiatives like TFA appeal to our desire to serve and help, but shortchange the students who need and deserve more.

We, as a nationwide collective of educators of color and educational scholars of color, oppose the failed reforms that are being forced by wealthy philanthropists onto our communities with problematic and often devastating results. These must end now. We support reforms that better serve our students, particularly in poorer communities of color, and we will continue to work with lawmakers, leaders, school systems, and the public to make such goals a reality.

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