

# The History of the School Privatization Movement

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## The Neoliberal Goal to Privatize All Public Services

Neoliberal Republicans and Tea Partiers (and now Barack Obama and Department of Education director Arne Duncan) give lip service to improving achievement levels for students in inner city schools. However instead of improving funding to these struggling schools, the one intervention supported by statistical research, they continue to aggressively shift education funding from public schools to private charter schools – despite the Stanford study showing that charter programs don't improve achievement levels (see previous blog). In my mind, this is totally consistent with what I believe is their real agenda – namely privatizing public education.

Neoliberalism seeks to privatize *all* public services (education, social security, water, prisons, public transportation, welfare services) – leaving a bare bones government with a strictly security and military role. Neoliberals argue that public provision of these services is inefficient and wasteful – problems that can only be corrected by subjecting them to free market competition. But as we have seen in the case of prison, water, and welfare privatization, there are always windfall profits for businesses and corporations when billions of public, taxpayer dollars are transferred to private hands.

## Milton Friedman: the Father of School Privatization

Milton Friedman, the father of neoliberal economics, is also the father of the school privatization movement. He initially envisioned (in 1955) using a school voucher system to incrementally privatize public schools. Under such a system a student receives a voucher valued at the “per pupil equivalent” (i.e. the amount the government would pay for their public education – when the first voucher programs started in the 1990s, this was between \$2,000-3,000). The child's parent then applies the voucher towards the \$10,000-20,000 private school tuition.

Shortly after his election in 1980, Ronald Reagan and his secretary of education William Bennett (who coined the term “throwing money at schools”) began an unprecedented and far reaching attack on teachers, teachers unions and school district bureaucracy. Bennett liked to refer to school boards and school districts as “the blob.” One of the goals of school privatization is to replace democratically elected school boards – accountable to both parents and the public – with a more efficient corporate-like board, which meets in secret and isn't open to public scrutiny or freedom of information.



*Reagan with economic adviser Milton Friedman*

Reagan accompanied his public attack on teachers and public schools with a simultaneous 50% cut in federal Title I funding for schools in low income districts. His attempt to push voucher legislation through Congress failed, owing to concerns that vouchers subsidizing tuition at private religious schools violated constitutional separation of church and state provisions. At this point Reagan backtracked, promoting school choice via the creation of privately run “charter” schools, subsidized with state, local and federal education funds.

## Right Wing Think Tanks Behind the Charter School Movement

Bush senior restored Reagan's cuts to Title 1, though he promoted the concept of school choice and the development of voucher programs on a state-by-state basis. It was right wing philanthropists and their corporate funding think tanks who provided most of the momentum behind the charter school movement when the first charter school opened in 1991. The long list of conservative think tanks involved includes the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, Americans for Tax Reform, Black America's Political Action Committee, the Cato Institute, Center for the study of Popular Cultures, the Eagle Forum, Focus on the Family, Hispanic Alliance for Progress Institute, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, and the Hoover Institution. (See <http://www.counterpunch.org/weil08262009.html>).

*To be continued, with a discussion of the billions of dollars of private funding going to charter schools – and why.*

63 year old psychiatrist, activist and author of a recently published memoir THE MOST REVOLUTIONARY ACT: MEMOIR OF AN AMERICAN REFUGEE. Which describes my decision in 2002 - owing to extensive government harassment for my political activities to close my 25-year Seattle practice and begin a new life in New Zealand. What commenced as unrelenting phone harassment and illegal break-ins progressed to attempts on my life and an affair with an undercover operative who railroaded me into a psychiatric hospital. See review in OpEdNews <http://www.opednews.com/articles/A-Psychiatrist-Searches-f-by-Michael-David-Morr-100812-950.html>

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