



PBS Runs A Three-Hour Series Glorifying The DeVos Education Agenda

Funded by conservative foundations devoted to privatization, this program is the definition of paid propaganda.

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Public education today faces an existential crisis. Over the past two decades, the movement to transfer public money to private organizations has expanded rapidly. The George W. Bush administration first wrote into federal law the proposal that privately managed charter schools were a remedy for low-scoring public schools, even though no such evidence existed. The Obama administration provided hundreds of millions each year to charter schools, under the control of private boards. Now, the Trump administration, under the leadership of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, wants to expand privatization to include vouchers, virtual schools, cyberschools, homeschooling, and every other possible alternative to public education. DeVos has said that public education is a “dead end,” and that “government sucks.”

DeVos’s agenda finds a ready audience in the majority of states now controlled by Republican governors and legislatures. Most states already have some form of voucher program that allow students to use public money to enroll in private and religious schools, even when their own state constitution prohibits it. The Republicans have skirted their own constitutions by asserting that the public money goes to the family, not the private or religious school. The longstanding tradition of separating church and state in K-12 education is crumbling. And Betsy DeVos can testify with a straight face that she will enforce federal law to “schools that receive federal funding,” because voucher schools allegedly do not receive the money, just the family that chooses religious schools.

Advocates of the privatization movement like DeVos claim that nonpublic schools will “save poor children from failing public schools,” but independent researchers have recently concurred that vouchers actually have had a negative effect on students in the District of Columbia, Indiana, Louisiana, and Ohio. Charters, at best, have a mixed record, and many are known for excluding children with disabilities and English language learners and for pushing out students who are troublesome.

This is a time when honest, nonpartisan reporting is needed to inform the American public.

But this month the Public Broadcasting System is broadcasting a “documentary” that tells a one-sided story, the story that Betsy DeVos herself would tell, based on the work of free-market advocate Andrew Coulson. Author of “Market Education,” Coulson narrates “School, Inc.,” a three-hour program, which airs this month nationwide in three weekly broadcasts on PBS.

Uninformed viewers who see this slickly produced program will learn about the glories of unregulated schooling, for-profit schools, teachers selling their lessons to students on the Internet. They will learn about the “success” of the free market in schooling in Chile, Sweden, and New Orleans. They will hear about the miraculous charter schools across America, and how public school officials selfishly refuse to encourage the transfer of public funds to private institutions. They will see a glowing portrait of South Korea, where students compete to get the highest possible scores on a college entry test that will define the rest of their lives and where families gladly pay for after-school tutoring programs and online lessons to boost test scores. They will hear that the free market is more innovative than public schools.

What they will not see or hear is the other side of the story. They will not hear scholars discuss the high levels of social segregation in Chile, nor will they learn that the students protesting the free-market schools in the streets are not all “Communists,” as Coulson suggests. They will not hear from scholars who blame Sweden’s choice system for the collapse of its international test scores. They will not see any reference to Finland, which far outperforms any other European nation on international tests yet has neither vouchers nor charter schools. They may not notice the absence of any students in wheelchairs or any other evidence of students with disabilities in the highly regarded KIPP charter schools. They will not learn that the acclaimed American Indian Model Charter Schools in Oakland does not enroll any American Indians, but has a student body that is 60 percent Asian American in a city where that group is 12.8 percent of the student population. Nor will they see any evidence of greater innovation in voucher schools or charter schools than in properly funded public schools.

Coulson has a nifty way of dismissing the fact that the free market system of schooling was imposed by the dictator Augusto Pinochet. He says that Hitler liked the Hollywood movie “It Happened One Night” (with Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable); should we stop showing or watching the movie? Is that a fair comparison? Pinochet was directly responsible for the free market system of schooling, including for-profit private schools. Hitler neither produced nor directed “It Happened One Night.” Thus does Coulson refer to criticisms (like Sweden’s collapsing scores on international tests) and dismisses them as irrelevant.

I watched the documentary twice, preparing to be interviewed by Channel 13, and was repelled by the partisan nature of the presentation. I googled the funders and discovered that the lead funder is the Rose Mary and Jack Anderson Foundation, a very conservative foundation that is a major contributor to the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, which advocates for vouchers. The Anderson Foundation is allied with Donors Trust, whose donors make contributions that cannot be traced to them. Mother Jones referred to this foundation as part of “the dark-money ATM of the conservative movement.” Other contributors to Donors Trust include the Koch brothers’ Americans for Prosperity and the Richard and Helen DeVos Foundation.

The second major funder is the Prometheus Foundation. Its public filings with the IRS show that its largest grant (\$2.5 million) went to the Ayn Rand Institute. The third listed funder of “School Inc.” is the Steve and Lana Hardy Foundation, which contributes to free-market libertarian think tanks.

In other words, this program is paid propaganda. It does not search for the truth. It does not present opposing points of view. It is an advertisement for the demolition of public education and

for an unregulated free market in education. PBS might have aired a program that debates these issues, but “School Inc.” does not.

It is puzzling that PBS would accept millions of dollars for this lavish and one-sided production from a group of foundations with a singular devotion to the privatization of public services. The decision to air this series is even stranger when you stop to consider that these kinds of anti-government political foundations are likely to advocate for the elimination of public funding for PBS. After all, in a free market of television, where there are so many choices available, why should the federal government pay for a television channel?