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Ravitch: Why is PBS running this education documentary?

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If you go to the website of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington that believes in privatizing the public education system, you will learn about a three-part documentary called “School Inc.,” which is narrated by the late director of the organization’s Center for Educational Freedom. The documentary has been called the magnum opus of Andrew Coulson, who was a researcher and author who promoted the idea that free markets and the profit motive would improve education in the United States. Coulson called traditional public schools “government-run” and was a strong proponent of school tax credit programs that use public money to fund private education.

It is no surprise, then, that School Inc. — whose primary funders have the same educational beliefs as Coulson — would extol the virtues of privatized education and attack public education. What is surprising to some public education activists, however, is that the documentary is being shown on publicly funded PBS stations.

Diane Ravitch, the education historian and former assistant secretary of education who became the titular head of the movement fighting corporate school reform and the privatization of the public education system, watched the documentary and wrote in the following piece that viewers will not get anything close to a balanced view of the education reform debate in the country and around the world.

A PBS spokesman said in an email (you can see the full response below) that the network stations “offer programs that reflect diverse viewpoints and promote civic dialogue” and that School Inc. is “an independent production that reflects the personal viewpoint of series creator Andrew Coulson.”

It also said that PBS has “high editorial standards” that ensure “that the creative and editorial processes behind the programs offered on PBS are shielded from political pressure or improper influence from funders or other sources.” There was no immediate response to a follow-up query about the connection between the pro-privatization funders and the content of School Inc.

Here’s Ravitch’s piece, and after that is the full PBS response.

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. Many states already have some form of voucher or voucher-like program that allow students to use public money to enroll in private and religious schools, even when their own state constitution prohibits using public funds for religious schools. The Republicans have skirted their own constitutions by asserting that the public money goes to the family, not the private or religious school. The long-standing tradition of separating church and state in K-12 education is crumbling.

Advocates of the privatization movement such as 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.

Charter schools, 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 DeVos herself would tell, based on the work of the late free-market advocate Andrew Coulson. Author of “Market Education,” Coulson narrates “School Inc.,” a three-hour program, which airs nationwide in three weekly broadcasts on some PBS stations

Uninformed viewers who see this very 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 notes that Adolf Hitler liked the Hollywood movie “It Happened One Night” (with Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable), and then asks if that is a reason to stop showing or watching the movie. But 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.” This is the method by which Coulson refers to criticism (like Sweden’s collapsing scores on international tests) and then dismisses it as irrelevant.

I watched the documentary twice, preparing to be interviewed by Channel 13 in New York, and was repelled by the partisan nature of the presentation. I researched 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 PBS 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?

PBS response

Asked about why PBS is running the documentary, Jennifer Rankin Byrne, the head of corporate communications at PBS, said in an email:

PBS and local member stations aim to offer programs that reflect diverse viewpoints and promote civic dialogue on important topics affecting local communities. *School Inc*, which is presented by member station WNET, is an independent production that reflects the personal viewpoint of series creator Andrew Coulson on systems of schooling around the world, and is being made available to local stations for optional use in their programming schedules.

PBS’ high [editorial standards](http://about.lunchbox.pbs.org) have helped to make PBS America’s most trusted national institution for 14 years running. These standards ensure, among other things, that the creative and editorial processes behind the programs offered on PBS are shielded from political pressure or improper influence from funders or other sources.

In addition, PBS aims for a balance of viewpoints across the entire PBS schedule. Within this series, there are comparisons and criticisms of both public and private education models. Other education-based programming that PBS has recently distributed includes the [Spotlight Education](http://pbs.org) week-long broadcast last August, consisting of more than 10 hours of education-related programming including “[A Subprime Education](http://pbs.org)” from Frontline, “[School of the Future](http://pbs.org)” from NOVA and “[All the Difference](http://pbs.org)” from POV.

PBS did not immediately respond to a query about Byrne’s response, specifically asking about the link between the pro-school privatization funders and the content of the documentary.