

## PBS Is Airing Right-Wing-Sponsored School Privatization Propaganda

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Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and her department have pushed for an expansion of privatized school choice programs in the proposed budget for fiscal year 2018, particularly in the form of private school vouchers. Now a propagandistic three-part documentary series called *School Inc.* will help DeVos in her efforts to gain public support for expanded private school choice options. The series has already aired on PBS stations in some markets and will be shown on more this month,

A majority of people across the partisan spectrum oppose private school vouchers, programs that redirect public education money to pay for private school tuition. Vouchers are problematic for many reasons, including their history of allowing for discrimination against LGBTQ, disabled, and special education students, their impact on reducing public education funding, and their ineffectiveness in boosting academic achievement.

Despite these problems, private school vouchers are a long-standing priority of the corporations and right-wing funders backing the education privatization movement. The late Andrew Coulson, long-time head of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, was the driving force behind *School Inc.* The Cato Institute is a right-wing, libertarian think-tank that calls for the elimination of public schools in support of greater “educational freedom” to choose from a free market of privately run schools.

In addition to *School Inc.*'s roots in the radical, libertarian Cato Institute, education historian and former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch found that the film was funded by a number of arch-conservative foundations with ties to the “dark money ATM” DonorsTrust and the Ayn Rand Institute. Ravitch has prescreened *School Inc.* and provided this scathing review to *The Washington Post*:

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.

Why would a *public* broadcast channel air a documentary that is produced by a right-wing think tank and funded by ultra-conservative donors, and that presents a single point of view without meaningful critique, all the while denigrating *public* education? PBS responded in part with

a statement to the *Post*, saying, “PBS and local member stations aim to offer programs that reflect diverse viewpoints and promote civic dialogue on important topics affecting local communities.”

However, as Ravitch notes, when a documentary fails to objectively present information about a topic that may not be well understood by the general public, the result is unlikely to “promote civic dialogue”. And when major media outlets uncritically provide a platform to right-wing ideologues, they further misinform and polarize the debate around important issues such as public education.