



## A detailed critique of a PBS-run education documentary

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This is a detailed critique of a three-part documentary called “School Inc.,” which was aired recently by some PBS stations across the country. Written by Diane Ravitch and Carol Burris, the critique looks at some of the claims made in the documentary about traditional public schools — which they say presents a distorted view — and explains why this debate matters at a time when President Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos are pushing school choice policies.

“School Inc.” was created and narrated by Andrew Coulson, the late director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom and a researcher and author who promoted the idea that free markets and the profit motive would improve education in the United States. He was a strong proponent of school tax credit programs that use public money to fund private education. The three hours of programming was funded by foundations that support the same thing.

I ran a short post about the programming last month, [which you can read here](#), and at that time, a PBS spokesman said in an email that “School Inc.” is “an independent production that reflects the personal viewpoint of series creator Andrew Coulson” and that it was part of the mission of the network to “offer programs that reflect diverse viewpoints and promote civic dialogue.” The email 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.”

You can see the full response below, and there is a response from Neal McCluskey, the current director of the Center for Educational Freedom, who wrote in this piece about the controversy: “Perhaps ... PBS officials thought the series had high-quality content, and discerning viewers could determine for themselves whether they accepted its premise.” He also wrote this, reflecting opposition to traditional public schools:

“As with public schooling, there is good reason to oppose publicly funded television because it is impossible to represent the views of every taxpayer equally. But PBS exists, and points of view seem to be articulated without having to be balanced out.”

I have asked PBS new questions about “School Inc.” and will publish the responses when I receive them.

Ravitch is the well-known 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. She co-founded the nonprofit Network for Public Education, an education information and advocacy organization. Burriss is an award-winning former New York high school principal who is executive director of the Network for Public Education. She has been chronicling problems with corporate school reform for years on this blog.

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has famously called America's public education system a "dead end," and disparagingly calls traditional public schools "government schools." She and President Trump have set out an agenda that critics say is aimed at replacing the traditional public system with publicly funded private and religious schools.

Do you think this is a wild speculation? Think again. The playbook was uncritically aired on PBS this spring.

PBS ("The Public Broadcasting System") is known for its high standards and for its thoughtful documentaries that explain issues in a fair and well-informed manner. But in this case, PBS broadcast "School Inc.," three hours of content funded by right-wing foundations and right out of the privatizers' playbook. The program was partisan, inaccurate and biased against public schools. Not every PBS station aired this documentary, but many did. The timing was fortuitous for Trump and DeVos, whose "school choice" agenda aligns neatly with the philosophy expressed in "School Inc."

First, a word about the funders of this program. The lead funder was the strongly conservative Rose-Marie and Jack R. Anderson Foundation. According to [Sourcewatch](#):

The Rose-Marie and Jack R. Anderson Foundation is a 501(c)(3) grant-making foundation located in Plano, Texas. Many of the foundation's contributions are given to conservative organizations seeking to promote private schools and public voucher school programs, in addition to the donor-advised conservative [DonorsTrust](#) fund and the [State Policy Network](#) web of right-wing "think tanks.

[The Gleason Family Foundation](#) in California, which backs school choice organizations, also funded the program. According to its tax filings, it has contributed generously to the voucher-promoting EdChoice (previously known as the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice), the CATO Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council and the no-excuses charter chain "Uncommon Schools." The other major funders are the [Prometheus](#) Foundation, whose public filings with the IRS show that its largest grant (\$2.5 million) went to the Ayn Rand Institute, and the Steve and Lana Hardy Foundation, which contributes to free-market libertarian think tanks.

We will explain as best as we can why we think PBS should give equal time to an unbiased portrayal of American education and its many challenges.

The documentary "School Inc." expressed the personal views of the late [Andrew Coulson](#), who was long associated with the libertarian Cato Institute. In 1999, Coulson published a book titled "Market Education," expressing his fervent belief in the free market as a means of delivering

educational services to the entire population. Ironically, proponents of this view want taxpayers to subsidize a market in which the schools are deregulated and unaccountable, rather than an unsubsidized market.

The thesis of Coulson's show is that public schools have failed to embrace innovation for over a century. He claims that only private, for-profit schooling is truly innovative. It is a false caricature that makes one wonder whether Coulson, who grew up in Canada, ever set foot in a public school in the United States.

Public schools, we would argue, are more innovative than private schools and religious schools, and certainly more innovative than for-profit schools, which must cut costs to provide returns for their investors.

Enter a well-resourced public school and you will find many foreign languages taught, robotics programs, a school orchestra, advanced technology, smart-boards, a jazz band, a theater company capable of putting on Broadway plays, physical education programs of extraordinary breadth and academic specialties that most private and religious schools never offer. You will see highly educated teachers, most of them far better educated than the teachers in religious schools and far more qualified than those in charter schools, which are allowed to hire uncertified, inexperienced teachers. You will also see remarkable provisions for students with disabilities and professionals trained to meet their needs — provisions absent from most private schools, which usually reject students with disabilities. And these innovative practices are absent from the schools Coulson glorifies on his “personal journey.”

Coulson begins his fanciful but false story with a portrayal of the origins of American public education. He romanticizes the state of education in the new nation before Horace Mann and the introduction of public education. Although he claims to love innovation, he is infatuated with American education in the 1820s. He tells viewers that some children were home-schooled, some went to church schools and some were taught by people who advertised their lessons in the local newspaper for a fee.

This is clearly the time in American history that he likes best. He claims that literacy rates were rising rapidly, without substantiating his claim. At that time, however, there was no government agency collecting data on literacy rates, nor any standard definition of “literacy.” Was 10 percent of the population literate? Twenty percent? Thirty percent? No one can say with certainty. Did “literacy” mean the ability to sign your name? Or something more? No one can say with certainty. Whatever the boost in the “literacy rate,” many children were left behind without the barest literacy.

Ravitch wrote a history of education in New York City. At the time that Coulson praises, many city children were street urchins. They had no formal education at all. That is why philanthropic groups opened charity schools for the children of the poor. And that is why the New York state legislature decided in the 1840s that the city needed a real public school system, one that was open and free to all children. Before the advent of state-provided public schooling there were elite private schools for the rich, church schools for children of church members, and charity schools for the poor, but there were still large numbers of children who were illiterate. However,

Coulson never acknowledges that his fantasy world without public schools had huge deficits, especially for the children of the poor. Perhaps he didn't know.

Coulson belittles Horace Mann and James Carter of Massachusetts for their visionary understanding of the importance of public education. Coulson prefers the haphazard provision of schooling that preceded the common school movement of the 1830s and 1840s, even though many children had no schooling at all. Mann, Carter, Henry Barnard of Connecticut and the Stowe family in Ohio understood that the future of democracy depended on educating all children, not just those whose parents could pay for it or those whose church supported a free school. The free market was tried — and it was not enough for a democratic society.

Coulson moves from a romanticized past to a romanticized present. He spends considerable time praising Jaime Escalante, the Advanced Placement Calculus teacher memorialized in the film “Stand and Deliver.” He implies that Escalante was driven out of Garfield High School by a union that despised his work ethic and success. Escalante left Garfield after losing his department chairman position, for which he received a stipend. A talented teacher, Escalante said that he was fed up with what he called the “ingratitude” of some of his colleagues and frustrated by parents who didn't value academic achievement. He moved to another public high school in Los Angeles.

This is the beginning of a thread that runs throughout “School Inc.” With the exception of Escalante, Coulson portrays public school teachers as lazy, uncaring, undereducated, unmotivated and even corrupt (India). Teachers in private schools, in contrast, are portrayed as superstars, selfless, highly motivated and devoted. He makes his case, not based on studies or objective data, but by finding students who are willing to say how bad public school teaching is. In doing so, he appeals to stereotypes and emotion.

Coulson thinks that profit in itself is an innovation and, therefore, for-profit teaching would result in better instruction. For example, he marvels at a Korean teacher who sells his test-preparation lessons online, thereby making millions of dollars as part of the test-prep hagwon night schools. Viewers watch the teacher read notes into his headset in front of what appear to be hundreds of compliant students. He interviews students who portray their public schools as unchallenging and boring — places to sleep so they can attend hagwons until the early hours of the morning.

Se-Woong Koo, a former hagwon teacher, however, paints a very different picture of the hagwon in his commentary in the New York Times, titled “An Assault Upon Our Children.” Koo describes hagwons as a “system driven by overzealous parents and a leviathan private industry” and “a private education industry run amok” that is resulting in students who develop serious physical illnesses from lack of rest and stress.

Coulson just gets it wrong. Hagwons, with their superstar lecture teachers, do not represent innovation. They are pressure cookers for a society that worships high-stakes testing.

Coulson moves on to praise the charter school sector, using KIPP Public Charter Schools and the American Indian Model Charter Schools as his next examples of innovation and excellence.

There is no evidence that the pedagogy of KIPP is innovative. With its high attrition rates and lower numbers of students with disabilities as compared with traditional public schools, its “no excuses” philosophy resembles American schools of a century ago, which relied on compliance for instructional purposes. Even its founders have admitted that it is not for every child.

He then visits the American Indian Model Schools (AIMS), charter schools in Oakland, Calif., to convince the viewer that the public schools conspired to shut down wonderful charter schools. What he does not mention (and there was no effort to insert this fact in postproduction) are two salient facts about AIMS. First, it was founded as a charter school for Native Americans. It had very low test scores.

Then the charter brought in a new leader, Ben Chavis, and under his leadership, Native American students no longer enrolled in the school. The Native American population is now 0 percent; now the schools’ demographics are 54 percent Asian, even though they are located in a district where the Asian student population is 12.8 percent.

Chavis, no longer at the school, was indicted by federal officials for mail fraud and money laundering in connection with his leadership at AIMS, and \$3.8 million was found to have been appropriated by Chavis and his wife. There was a concerted effort to close down the American Indian charters. The school was also sanctioned for numerous violations, including nonexistent board oversight, that resulted in the nearly \$4 million of misappropriation of tax dollars.

However, Coulson’s real intent in this section is not to show innovation, but rather to push a radical idea that most of the public would find repulsive — leaving the education of the poor to depend on the generosity of the rich.

As he visits the charters, Coulson emphasizes the importance of philanthropy to scale up successful charters. That is not said as a mere aside. Coulson believes that philanthropy should educate the poor in his ideal system of for-profit, paid-for-by-the-customer, schooling. In his book (Page 324), he advocates for a competitive market in private scholarship programs to educate the poor:

“It is only a matter of time before low-income parents will be able to choose between scholarships from multiple foundations, each of which is competing vigorously with the others for the right to distribute the dollars of discerning donors to poor kids.”

Moving again beyond America’s borders, Coulson then brings viewers to Chile and Sweden, countries that have moved closer to his Libertarian ideal of unfettered choice, including schools that operate for profit. Once again, he presents a one-sided story that attributes progress to the commercialization of schools.

Coulson first visits Chile, attributing test-score improvement to its all-choice, voucher system put in place by former dictator Pinochet. Coulson dismisses the fact that the schools were privatized by a brutal dictator as a means by which to maintain his control.

He notes that poverty in Chile has dropped from 50 percent to 15 percent. According to the international Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 46 percent of the

variation in test scores on PISA — a test given every three years to 15-year-olds around the world in reading, math and science — are attributable to wealth. Given that dramatic drop in the poverty level, Chile's results on international tests should be on a steep climb. Yet Chile's PISA scores have remained relatively flat and well below those of the United States and the world average. Why would we want to use the privatized, less successful Chilean system as a model?

What we know is that privatization in Chile created a stratified system of education that is segregated by class. The majority of the wealthiest students attend fully private schools, most upper-middle-class students attend voucher schools and the poorest students attend schools receiving only a minimum level of state funding.

According to a study by scholars Antoni Verger, Xavier Bonal and Adrián Zancajo titled “What Are the Role and Impact of Public-Private Partnerships in Education? A Realist Evaluation of the Chilean Education Quasi-Market”:

The effects of these dynamics on social justice and inequality of opportunities are multiple and devastating. There is a negative peer effect as a result of school segregation, for every potentially good student that is able to “escape” a bad school and to enroll with high-performing peers, there is a loss of that student in a school that remains full of low performers. However, the peer-effect losses that these dynamics have the potential to undermine the aggregate quality of the education system as well as the educational opportunities of those students that are not able to “escape.

Thus, what Chile's privatization has achieved is a highly stratified school system, one that favors children of the rich above all others.

Moving on to Sweden, Coulson quickly deflects the criticism that privatization has caused the precipitous drop in the nation's PISA scores, blaming that drop instead on what he characterizes as a weak public school teaching force and government control of curriculum. He ignores the far greater success of neighboring Finland, where students score among the top on PISA in a system that is public, unionized and focused on equity, not market-based reforms.

Coulson highlights and praises the for-profit Swedish chain Kunskapsskolan, a system of “personalized learning.” He does not bother to mention that Kunskapsskolan, which was admired by former Florida governor Jeb Bush and right-wing media mogul Rupert Murdoch, was tried in the United States and failed. In “Education and the Commercial Mindset,” Sam Abrams tell us how former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's schools chancellor, Joel Klein, helped bring Kunskapsskolan to New York, where it was called the Innovate Manhattan Charter School. In its fourth year, its governing board shut it down. The school had financial difficulties, attracted few students and had poor academic performance.

Although there is far more to critique in this faux “documentary,” the bottom line is this — the for-profit marketplace competition that Coulson is selling does not work. It does not benefit students, it does not improve education, and it is not remotely innovative. The claim of DeVos and other “choice” proponents that competition will spur innovation is false. In real education markets, privatized schools have far stronger incentives to go for what researchers refer to as

“second-order competition” — competition not in internal improvement but rather in marketing to recruit more academically able and compliant students.

That is why we see both smaller shares of students with disabilities and English-language learners in charters and private schools, and why the American Indian Charter School focuses on recruiting high-achieving Asian American students, rather than the disadvantaged Native Americans it was intended to serve.

There were numerous inaccuracies and unfair generalizations in the three hours given by PBS to Coulson’s opinions. Our intent in this critique was to correct some of the most egregious. We regret that our review of this documentary cannot possibly reach as many people as the three hours of programming that many PBS viewers saw on their local public television station. Wealthy donors with a political agenda to buy valuable airtime have as much right to create a documentary expressing their opinions as anyone else, but PBS has an obligation to assess the accuracy of the material.

Having failed to do that, we believe PBS — as a matter of fairness — should give equal time to those who believe that universal, free and democratically controlled public education is a foundation stone of our democracy.

I am republishing the following material that was on my first post about “School Inc.”:

### **PBS response**

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

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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”[pbs.org] from Frontline, “School of the Future[pbs.org]” from NOVA and “All the Difference[pbs.org]” from POV.

McCluskey, the director of Cato’s Center for Educational Freedom, wrote a critique of Ravitch’s piece on the Cato blog, which you can find here. In his response, McCluskey says in part, “Many of Ravitch’s more substantive critiques reveal why it is so crucial that all sides be heard.”

In an email, Ravitch noted that the documentary itself is not balanced, presenting only the side supported by school privatization supporters, and that Coulson makes statements that he doesn’t support with facts, such as the claim that charter schools are “innovative.”