



Code Words and Green Dot's Pandering to Westside Racism

by Robert D. Skeels / October 17th, 2009

There's nothing the matter with teachers that a little less unionization and more COMPETITION couldn't cure.

– Ann Coulter (racist reactionary right wing pundit)

It would force the district to learn how to run great schools by forcing them to COMPETE.

– Ben Austin (Executive Director LAPU/PR)

Several Emerson Middle School parents, activists, and teachers recently contacted me. They informed me LAPU/Parent (counter)Revolution has an “organizer” going door-to-door gathering signatures to privatize their school, this despite the fact Emerson isn't on LAUSD Superintendent Cortines' current privatization list. I asked them to describe the “organizer,” expecting LAPU/PR to have committed one of their most experienced employees, Shirley Ford or Mary Najara, to a project so ideologically important to chief privatizer [Ben Austin](#).

The person gathering signatures they described, while initially unexpected, made complete sense in the context of the class character and demographics of where the canvassing is occurring. We'll get back to this shortly.

Anyone over the age of 30 should recall phrases including “school choice” were the clarion call of segregationists and southern dixiecrats. It's no small irony that one of Ben Austin's Georgetown University Law School predecessors, [Milton Korman](#), argued on the Jim Crow side of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. While the context of modern white flight isn't directly comparable to that of the segregationists, its character and motivations are the same. Let's look at the subtle, insidious racism that fuels the charter/voucher movement.

It's one thing to discuss the racism charter schools and voucher advocates like Alliance, Bright Star, and Green Dot represent in the abstract. It's quite another to demonstrate it in practice. For help with this, let's turn to an Emerson parent who is an ardent Green Dot/LAPU/PR supporter. This parent, posting anonymously as *helpemerson* on the LAPU/PR Emerson privatization message board, forgets they're posting in a public forum and lets the code words fly:

I think the Green Dot priorities would be great at Emerson. The kids need more work on their character and decorum and what it means to be a good citizen.¹

Character? Decorum? No, that wasn't a Sarah Palin speech. It is however, very representative of the language employed by affluent white parents at Los Angeles schools where children of color have been or are currently bused in. In the wealthy white world of Beverly Hills, Westwood, and Franklin Canyon, phrases like “those people,” and questions like “when will they stop bussing?” top the list of code words overheard by social justice minded parents and teachers at schools like Emerson and Mark Twain.² These racist code words employed by westside parents like

helpemerson including “character” and “decorum” fit right in with the bigoted westside phrases like “culture of failure” exposed in Carolyn Jacobson’s brilliant article [“The Revolution of Separate, but Equal.”](#)

This brings us back to the beginning of our essay, in which we were discussing LAPU/PR’s choice of organizers for their westside offensive. The description people provided of the LAPU/PR petition bearer went as follows: young, thin, blonde hair, blue eyes, and female. They were describing one of LAPU/PR’s newer employees, Nayla Wren. *Is it pure coincidence Green Dot would prefer their blonde, blue eyed employee to canvas the affluent, predominantly white westside neighborhoods over their most experienced and seasoned “organizers,” who just happen to be women of color? Probably no more coincidence than the fact that all of Green Dot’s top executives are wealthy white males. Probably no more coincidence than Ben Austin calling 77% white Warner Avenue Elementary wonderful, and 11% white Emerson Middle School failing.*³ Green Dot’s pandering to white flight and westside elitism is part and parcel the type of racism and segregation discussed in Jonathan Kozol’s seminal works *“Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools”* and *“The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America.”* One of the reasons Green Dot/LAPU/PR protested, but couldn’t refute⁴ Carolyn Jacobson’s article exposing westside racism, is that when the covers are pulled off the country club elitism of Steve Barr, Marshall Tuck, Antony Ressler, Ben Austin, and Marco Petruzzi, things get ugly.

Let’s be clear, the so called academic apologists for the racism and segregation inherent in charter schools and voucher programs include The Heritage Foundation, The Hoover Institution, The Cato Institute, and other far right think tanks.⁵ While these extreme right organizations are completely unconcerned with racial egalitarianism or class equality, they try to make a case that markets magically fix society’s systemic problems. These racist Milton Friedman cum Ayn Rand fantasies are adopted wholesale (with slight rewording) by the DLC/DFER crowd and presented as “innovation” and “reform.” No wonder Newt Gingrich and Ann Coulter are on the same side as Ben Austin and Arne Duncan. Let’s also bear in mind the critics of charter schools and vouchers include left luminaries like Donaldo Macedo, Jonathan Kozol, and Henry Giroux. This is why Ben Austin and Gabe Rose’s specious comparisons of those opposing school privatization and vouchers to right wing health care town hall disrupters⁶ are absurd on their face! [Privatization and neoliberalism](#) is the right wing position in the education reform debate, and the charter/voucher crowd represent reactionary ideas like segregation, competition, and union busting with great adeptness.

To those who would claim the motley assortment of business types, lawyers, and political hacks that comprise the pro-privatization camp have good intentions, but just misguided ways of executing them; and claim the reason extreme right forces happen to agree with the DLC/DFER on charters/vouchers is it’s just a manifestation of bipartisan concern for children, it’s reckoning time. Even if the wealthy white males on the leading edge of school privatization were really in it for their concern about society instead the money (exposed in Kozol’s [“The Big Enchilada”](#)), then they’d still be exhibiting precisely what Paulo Freire describes as “the false generosity of paternalism.”⁷

What’s more, it isn’t mere coincidence that LAUSD’s sole African American board member, Marguerite Poindexter LaMotte, vehemently opposed the corporate charter choice resolution. It’s been long recognized in communities of color that the [underfunding of inner city schools combined with privatization represented by charter/voucher advocates](#) is another way to perpetuate the grip of the white supremacist overclass. Let’s look at how progressive African American writers view the charter/voucher onslaught. *Los Angeles Sentinel’s* Larry Aubry said of LAUSD VP Yolie Flores Aguilar’s corporate charter choice resolution:

The Public School Choice Resolution continues pattern of indifference to the plight of Black students-that is not acceptable. Parents, teachers, school boards and concerned others must work hard, and together, to guarantee a quality education for these much maligned but

immeasurably deserving children.⁸

Black Agenda Radio's Glen Ford said of charter/voucher privatization:

“Outsourcing of public education only occurs in overwhelmingly Black and brown school districts, places where, like in Los Angeles, public property and public responsibility to students is put on the private auction block.⁹

Black Agenda Report's managing editor Bruce A. Dixon's recent article should be read in its entirety, but this quote is especially cogent and to the point:

Improving education is not the goal. Privatization is the goal. The targets of school privatization are not supposedly underperforming students and teachers. The target is democracy itself. Private interests are just that – private. Turning public schools over to private interests frustrates even the possibility of democracy. Charter school apologists often claim that greater parental involvement is a hallmark of their model. But to the extent that it is true at all, it's involvement of a select group of parents, and not open to those of the entire community. Charter schools undermine what is left of community.¹⁰

There's much more to explore on this topic, but for now this will have to suffice. Lest the poverty pimps and privatization pushers try and play the oldest card of colonialism, divide and conquer, check out the latest progressive [statement from the Association of Raza Educators](#) regarding charters/vouchers.

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1. [Emerson Middle School](#). I also created a screen capture, since Green Dot/LAPU/PR is famous for redacting reality. The [image](#) captures the Emerson LAPU supporter's racist code words for posterity. For some excellent articles on racist “code words” in general see: [Is the racist smear campaign working?](#) by Brian Jones
[Deciphering their racist code words](#) by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. [□]
 2. In the case of Mark Twain, the wealthy white elite of Venice (particularly the exclusive canal neighborhood from which Green Dot's ruthless CEO Marco Petruzzi hails). It's worth mentioning Mr. 90210, Ben Austin, lives near Emerson. Cynical much? [□]
 3. First [exposed](#) by journalist Caroline Grannan we also discuss this in a [blog](#). Could you imagine Eli Broad and Steve Barr sycophants Jason Song and Howard Blume actually doing real reporting like Grannan? Now that the *Los Angeles Times* is basically a PR department for Broad's DFER privatization project, we will never see an honest piece out of them again. [□]
 4. Note they [state](#) the piece is full of “disgusting and divisive lies,” but provide no evidence to the contrary. In other words, since everything in Ms. Jacobson's article is true, all the country club klan at LAPU/PR can do is smear the messenger. [□]
 5. The racist reactionary right wing loves charters, vouchers, and neoliberal phrases like school choice. They have devoted tons of ink to trying to explain how the free market doesn't perpetuate racism. Their arguments, with minor modification, have been adopted wholesale by the DLC/DFER. Here are a few of their disgusting works:

[The Heritage Foundation](#)

[The Hoover Institution](#)

[The Cato Institute](#) [□]

6. For feeble prose and an [example](#) of these ridiculous comparisons by the right wing privatizers trying to paint the left as right wing on this issue. [□]
 7. Paulo Freire “*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*” p. 54. If you claim to be on the left and haven't read Freire, you're fooling yourself. [□]
 8. [Blacks Not Part of Public School Choice Plan](#). [□]
 9. [Outsource It! Privatize It! LA School Reform in the Age of Obama](#). An astute comment following Ford's cogent article asks ‘Isn't this just institutionalization of the “Bell Curve?”’ Seems like a lot of folks see right through the racism of the charter/voucher “movement.” [□]
 10. [Obama's Public Education Policy: Privatization, Charters, Mass Firings, Neighborhood Destabilization](#). Bruce A. Dixon is a real revolutionary. Unlike those right wingers living in the 90210 zip code claiming and using the word without knowing what it really means. [□]
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