

School Wars



A handful of conservative billionaires with enormous political and media savvy are leading an all-out war on public education and its unionized teachers. Their initiative is part of a broader attack on all public services and public employee unions. This special section on the following pages outlines the attacks and explores alternatives.

What do the billionaires want from their version of school reform? See pages 8 and 10.

Can teacher unions refute the teacher-bashing and fight for a different model of education that's good for students, parents, teachers, and community? Teachers in Los Angeles are pushing hard. See page 11.

Or will they yield and form partnerships with their adversaries that sacrifice conditions for teachers and students alike? The experience of the influential New York teachers local is on page 9.

Billionaires' School Reform: What It Means for Teachers and Students

by Julie Cavanagh

The public conversation around education "reform" is dominated by a privileged few who seek to change schooling from a public service to a lucrative business.

Millionaires and billionaires, such as Bill Gates, Eli Broad, and the Walton family, owners of Wal-Mart, have spent years pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into think tanks and political campaigns.

They have captured the media through projects like the movie "Waiting for Superman" and NBC's "Education Nation." Their intent is clear: to gain control of public opinion and public policy and open up access to what they refer to as the K-12 "market," namely, our schools.

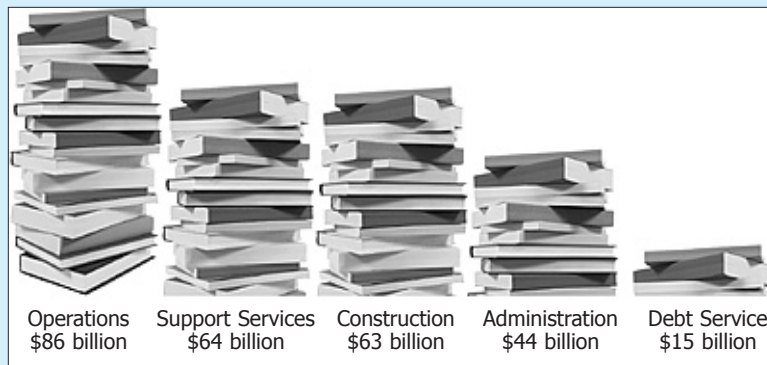
Sadly, the Obama administration, led by Education Secretary Arne Duncan, has the same plan.

Two years ago I faced the billionaires' agenda head on when my Triple A-rated public school was forced to give up part of our building to a privately run education corporation, commonly called a charter school. The charter was founded by the son of billionaire hedge-funder Julian Robertson.

As I watched our needy students, many of them with special needs, forced into shared classrooms, hallways, and closets, the intent became clear. Undermining public schools is part of a 30-year ideological offensive that says government services are inherently inferior, private industry will produce better results, and public sector unions present an obstacle to good services and rob taxpayers with over-generous salaries and pensions.

The education "reform" agenda cloaks itself in the language of the civil rights movement, but in truth the

Privatizers Chase Education's Billions



Wonder what's at stake in the charter school debate? How about a pot of money as big as the Pentagon budget? That's about \$562 billion in the 2006-07 school year, according to the latest numbers on local, state, and federal education spending, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

A little over half that spending—about \$291 billion—is for classroom instruction, mainly teacher salaries and benefits, so it's no wonder teachers have been in the crosshairs during recent budget battles.

It's also why for-profit charter school operators are salivating at the possibility of taking over a bigger chunk of education. Making a profit is easy if you can give charter school teachers cheap salaries and skimpy pension and health benefits.

But even if they can't get the whole enchilada, the privatizers want to capture bigger and bigger pieces of our public schools. The chart above illustrates how much money corporations stand to make by privatizing various parts of the nation's education system. All numbers are from the 2009 *Digest of Education Statistics*.

Topping the list is \$86 billion spent annually on operations, including \$20 billion for transportation and \$18 billion for food service.

Corporate honchos are also eyeing the \$63 billion spent on student support services, from librarians and multimedia specialists to school nurses and speech pathologists, as well as the \$44 billion outlay for administration and back-office functions.

Construction companies are already lined up for the \$63 billion school districts are spending on construction projects nationwide. And Wall Streeters are looking for their cut, first and foremost the chance to "manage" \$15 billion in debt school districts are shouldering—for hefty fees, of course.

—Mark Brenner

reforms would make conditions worse, particularly for children of color.

PUBLIC RESOURCE, PRIVATE HANDS

Until now, public officials have been responsible for providing a free and fair public education for all children. If our most important public resource is left in the hands of private interests, children are left without the protections government and unions provide.

One of the dangers is rampant discrimination. Charter schools across the country use selective enrollment to routinely turn away children with special needs and those learning English as a second language. They avoid serving the homeless and those in foster care or receiving reduced-cost or free lunches.

In addition, charter schools largely

have prevented their workers from organizing. Their ability to fire employees for any reason prevents educators and staff from advocating for the children.

Of course, real challenges do face our public schools: underfunding, overcrowding, and the social problems that weigh on student learning, especially in low-income communities. How do the "reformers" propose to address these problems?

First, get rid of "bad teachers," because, after all, "good teachers" can overcome any problem.

To do this, ensure "accountability" with standardized tests as the measure of student and educator performance. Control what educators teach by standardizing curricula in alignment with the tests.

Parents and educators across the country complain that this focus has routinized students' work and limited meaningful experiences. Often children are subjected to hours of stan-

darized testing.

Next, link teacher job security and pay to test scores, which are used to identify teachers and their schools as failures.

Once a school is considered failing, close it and replace it with a charter that picks and chooses the best students and leaves the rest behind.

The charter school will rely on inexperienced, under-trained teachers through programs such as Teach for America. These overworked and under-supported teachers seldom have union protection. Less than half stay in the profession beyond two years.

The result of high turnover is low wages—saving the charter company money on salaries and pensions. Teaching morphs from a secure, stable

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On Job Security, Closures, Charters

How's Partnership Working for Teachers?

by Howard Ryan

With a few local exceptions, America's teachers unions—the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—have met billionaire school reform with surrender, accommodation, and ill-advised partnership. The AFT's largest local is a case study in the turn-the-cheek approach.

New York City's United Federation of Teachers is a mammoth union in a mammoth school district, with 87,000 teachers serving 1.1 million students. While union responses vary from city to city, the UFT's posture is representative of national trends and, by virtue of its size and sophistication, strongly influential. It is no accident that AFT President Randi Weingarten led UFT before rising to the helm of the national union, as did two of her predecessors.

UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

Given the philosophy of teacher-blaming that guides today's schools, it is inevitable that performance evaluations of teachers are front and center.

Traditional evaluations relied on principals observing teachers in their classrooms. Nowadays teacher performance is increasingly measured by student performance—a measure many teachers consider unfair, since so many factors beyond teachers' control affect student performance.

UFT, however, fully accepts tying teacher evaluations to student performance. It's developing such an evaluation system with New York state's department of education (DOE). The union is actively selling the new system to teachers, pointing out that it relies on several performance measures, not just tests.

"Whether it's tests or other aspects of performance, we shouldn't be rated by student performance," says Marian Swerdlow, a 21-year high school social studies teacher who is active with Teachers for a Just Contract, a reform caucus in UFT.

Swerdlow teaches at one of 11 high schools where testing of the new evaluation system will soon be under way. A union vice president came to her school, she said, and announced that student improvement throughout the year will be the basis for 40 percent of each teacher's ratings.

Swerdlow takes strong objection: "What if the kid comes into my class

and is struggling to learn English? A year may not be enough time for him to acquire enough English, and he won't make that much progress."

In effect, the union and the DOE are



Bill Gates took the stage with AFT President Randi Weingarten at the union's last convention, earning an ovation from some delegates.

jointly setting up a system that promises widespread teacher failure.

GIVING UP JOB SECURITY

Step by step, New York schools have been weakening teachers' job security—with the union's acquiescence. When combined with the new evaluation system that threatens any teacher whose students struggle academically, the changes could result in a firing frenzy.

The union has allowed without protest new rules that make it harder for new teachers to get tenure. Opponents of teacher unions have made tenure a chief point of attack, painting it as giving lousy teachers a job for life. In reality, tenure is equivalent to completing probation, with due process rights over discipline or dismissal.

In the past, a teacher with three years of satisfactory ratings got tenure, Swerdlow said. But now the principal has to make a case to the New York City DOE. It's a complicated process, with data and value-added algorithms. Now, the default is that the teacher doesn't get tenure.

Tenured teachers are also losing job security, as the city's education department eagerly looks to cut higher-paid senior teachers. In the past, teachers who lost their assignments due to a school closure or program cut were automatically placed in the nearest available vacant position.

That ended with UFT's 2005 contract. Now "excessed" teachers must apply for vacant positions, and schools have no obligation to take them. If they have high seniority, their higher pay

makes them unattractive to principals.

The 2005 contract did provide a safety net: laid-off teachers are placed on "absent teacher reserve," with full pay and benefits. But now the DOE is demanding that time in reserves be limited to one year, as is the case in Chicago schools.

A limitation on New York's reserve time is very likely on the horizon, Swerdlow believes, which will lead to massive job loss, as seen in Washington, D.C. and Chicago after school closures and purges of "underperforming" teachers there. Shortly after this school year began, there were about 1,800 teachers in New York's reserve pool and about 1,200 vacancies in schools.

A new time limit on the reserve teachers will likely come out of deadlocked UFT contract negotiations, which are awaiting a fact-finding panel's recommendations.

If the reserve teachers lose protections, Swerdlow says it's because the union relied on fact-finding instead of organizing members for a vigorous contract campaign.

SCHOOL CLOSINGS AND CHARTERS

The billionaire reform agenda proposes to shut down public schools deemed to be failing and replace them with charter schools. Pushed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who wields full control over city schools, dozens have been closed and replaced with privately run but publicly funded charters, most of them non-union.

The UFT is pro-charter. The union's website hails charters' "innovation and promise" and boasts about forging a "collaborative relationship" with "progressive charter advocates, such as Green Dot." The union says it opposes charters only when they promote "ideological goals: privatizing public education and breaking the power of teacher unions." But dismantling public education and breaking unions is precisely the effect of the charter school movement.

UFT is caught in a vise, struggling to organize some charters while recognizing that the charter movement is privatizing teacher jobs and draining education budgets faster than it can keep up.

Meanwhile, UFT's partner Green Dot has been one of California's leading predators of public schools.

Green Dot sponsored California leg-

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'Performance Counts'

Unions Beat Anti-Teacher Agenda in Illinois

by Howard Ryan

The billionaires lost this round.

A billionaire gang headed by Bill Gates and Eli Broad wants to capture the billions spent on America's public schools and convert them into a corporate-owned test-score factory. But their plan faces teacher resistance, and nowhere more than in Chicago, where a feisty new leadership is heading the Chicago Teachers Union.

The billionaires went toe to toe with CTU and Illinois's 200,000 unionized teachers, pushing a state law that would have maximized the firing of teachers at will and gutted the very organizations best equipped to fight for good public schools—the teacher unions.

The Illinois bill, called the Performance Counts Act, never got beyond committee in the legislature, after the CTU and statewide teacher unions worked together to mobilize members and community supporters to quash it.

The corporate education forces have deep pockets, though. They're sure to try again.

MYSTERIOUS GROUP ARRIVES

Last October, journalists noticed that candidates for Illinois legislative seats were receiving unusually large checks. "It's not every day that a group almost nobody has ever heard of gives \$175,000 to a single state legislative candidate," remarked an *Illinois Times* contributor.

Another reporter observed that "a national education reform group has

quietly dumped more than \$600,000 into key Illinois legislative races." That group is Stand for Children, an enormously well-funded organization based in Portland, Oregon, with affiliates in seven states. SFC's largest single funder is Bill Gates.

Originally, SFC had a grassroots orientation, with a focus on demanding better funding for public schools. It grew out of a big 1996 rally in Washington, D.C., headed up by Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund and addressed by Rosa Parks.

Edelman's son Jonah afterwards established SFC in Portland and mobilized with teachers, the Service Employees union, and community groups to demand adequate funding for Oregon schools. But after a few years, SFC broadened its horizons from simple funding to "reforming education policies and practices."

The vision it chose is in sync with that of the billionaires and politicians who today are driving school "reform."

UNION SMASHING

While SFC materials generally avoid the subject of unions, or imply a friendly collaboration with them, SFC is fiercely anti-union, especially when the unions do not endorse its notion of school reform.

The group promotes Geoffrey Canada, Harlem education entrepreneur and hero of the documentary "Waiting for Superman," in which teacher unions

are the scourge of education. Canada was SFC's first board chair.

SFC's legislative achievements include an Arizona bill that ties teacher pay partly to student test scores. But its failed initiative in Illinois trotted out SFC's most virulent strain of anti-teacher unionism yet.

House Speaker Mike Madigan created a Special Committee on Education Reform, two of whose members received contributions from SFC this fall totaling \$150,000. The committee considered the Performance Counts Act, which SFC described as a "historic opportunity to help Illinois students." It proposed to:

Closely link teachers' performance evaluations to standardized test scores, a poor measure of learning.

Fire a tenured teacher or return her to probationary status after a single unsatisfactory evaluation. A teacher with three unsatisfactory evaluations within 10 years would be dismissed and could never teach in Illinois again.

Prohibit unions from bargaining over contracting out, layoffs, school closures, class size and class staffing, length of the school day or work day, pilot and experimental school programs, or use of technology. Unions could not even bargain over the effects of these policies on members or students.

Strip teachers' right to strike, and punish unlawful strikes with union decertification.

CTU, together with the statewide teachers unions, Illinois Education Association and Illinois Federation of Teachers, activated teachers and community allies. Their rallies, lobbying, and e-mail campaign convinced legislators to drop the bill by mid-January.

The teacher unions will pursue an alternative, a measure called Accountability for All, which cedes some ground on seniority rights but spreads accountability to principals, school board members, and school districts. For example, districts would be evaluated annually on establishing full staffing and quality teaching and learning conditions.

"We know what works inside schools—smaller class sizes, a rich curriculum, an end to excessive testing, and alliances among parents, students, teachers, and administrators," said Karen Lewis, CTU president. "But the attacks keep coming because what is at stake is clear: profit." □

How's Partnership Working for Teachers?

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isolation that grants parents living near an academically struggling school the power to force that school to become a charter, through petitioning. At the same time, Green Dot founder Steve Barr launched an organization called Parent Revolution, which uses paid organizers to press parents to sign petitions to privatize neighborhood schools.

UFT delayed some New York school closures through court challenges. But closures have continued apace, with 26 planned this year. The union's quiet, lawsuit-oriented approach can only slow the juggernaut.

Progressives within UFT, including the Grassroots Education Movement and Teachers for a Just Contract, have pressed the union to aggressively oppose closures, to no avail.

UFT's acquiescence to the billionaire agenda increased with President Obama's "Race to the Top" school funding program in 2009—a trend across teacher unions nationally.

The program invites states to compete for funds based on how thoroughly they have adopted the billionaires' education policies. UFT's support for tying teacher evaluations to student performance, and its decision not to protest legislation that almost doubled the number of charter schools in the state, helped New York win about \$700 million last August.

Race to the Top accomplished its goal. In exchange for short-term injections of badly needed money, UFT and other teacher unions cooperated with policies that undermine teachers and unions and threaten public education. □



David Rapkin

Los Angeles teachers rallied against class size increases and layoffs at a school board protest last year. Union members are fighting to center schools around social justice, fund them fully, and develop teachers in a pro-union environment.

Education Reform the Union Way

by Alex Caputo-Pearl and Cathy Garcia

Progressive Educators for Action has a vision for public education that's directly counterposed to the billionaires' agenda. PEAC is a caucus working to transform the 45,000-member United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) into a social justice union so that it can powerfully represent its members, and go much further.

We want a union that collaboratively represents the interests of all who depend on a truly public, high-quality education. Public schooling and teachers are weakened when students and communities are attacked through budget cuts, one-size-fits-all reform, privatization, and institutionally racist urban policies that contribute to pushing students out of school.

Kirti Baranwal is a middle school teacher in Watts. She says PEAC wants a union that understands building coalitions of parents, students, and community organizations to create high-quality schools is not only the right thing but also the best way to protect union members' interests.

PEAC members are organizing with co-workers on the ground and winning many over to the ideals of this model of social justice unionism.

PEAC, and increasingly UTLA, see three campaigns as foundations of our

work: fighting for full funding of schools and social services, creating schools that teach and represent social justice, and supporting the improvement of teachers and teaching in a pro-union environment.

The only effective approach for teachers unions is a social justice model—building a social movement for public education that lifts up students, communities, and teachers.

Each campaign develops new leaders, educates about political realities, and forms authentic partnerships with parents and community. PEAC pushes for campaigning to be anchored by bold actions that escalate towards work stoppages and strikes if necessary.

California hovers between 43rd and 50th among states in per-pupil spending (while it is first in prison spending). Ahead of last November's elections, PEAC helped UTLA join the California Alliance, a coalition of 27 community and labor organizations, to press for two ballot propositions. They sought to open up more money for schools and social services by closing corporate tax loopholes (which failed) and allowing

the state legislature to pass a budget with a simple majority rather than two-thirds (which passed).

"Those propositions move in the right direction, towards real progressive taxation," said Gillian Russom, a high school social studies teacher in East Los Angeles, adding that prison spending should be redirected to social needs.

Linking with California Alliance helps UTLA approach elections differently. We can systematically develop relationships with voters and organizations in communities of color over several election cycles, around reorienting budget priorities, authentic school reform, and the dangers of privatization.

SOCIAL JUSTICE SCHOOLS

The campaign to stop privatization and create social justice schools begins with a vision for authentic school reform—equity and access for all students; curriculum based on relevance, community connection, and social justice; democratic control of schools; union and collective bargaining rights for employees; and sustained efforts at reform that meet the needs of students.

PEAC and UTLA support reform projects that bring this vision to life—programs like the reading workshops at

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In L.A., Education Reform the Union Way

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Gompers Middle School. They engage struggling readers by helping them choose their own set of books they'd like to read, apprenticing them in reading strategies, and aiding them in applying themes from the reading to their lives and communities. Students are assisted in taking action around chang-

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job to a high-turnover, low-wage one.

In New York City, for example, half the teaching force leaves before reaching five years in the classroom. Leaving students without experienced educators damages their achievement.

DISTRACT, GAIN CONTROL

The billionaires' agenda also includes a three-pronged strategy for gaining control of school governance: mayoral control, which has been devastating in both Chicago and New York City; funding school board takeovers, as in San Diego (now reversed); and funding fake parent groups.

"Parent Revolution" in California, for example, is funded by the Broad Foundation. It supposedly includes active parents in Compton, but is really run by a Beverly Hills lawyer with paid organizers.

All the while, teachers and their unions are attacked as the obstacle to all of the above. Non-union charters are promoted as the solution.

Focusing all the attention on teachers conveniently ignores the lack of equitable funding for schools, caused by state and local tax structures that tilt toward the wealthy. The crying need for more money for schools is sidestepped by cutting student services and teachers' pay.

The need for policies to address poverty and other social factors that contribute to a child's failure or success in life can be ignored, because the mantra is that educators are solely responsible for a child's learning.

It's no coincidence that those fueling and funding school reform are millionaires, billionaires, and large corporations. To believe that their interest lies in helping children would require a suspension of logic and a denial of our history. □

[Julie Cavanagh is a special education teacher in Brooklyn and is active with the Grassroots Education Movement, a group that educates and mobilizes teachers, parents, and students.]

ing something in their lives or community that they feel strongly about and have new insights about.

Privatization works against social justice schools. Most California charter schools, particularly the chains funded by the billionaires' club, cream off the most motivated public school students and push out others who struggle academically. Most are not democratically controlled, but run by private boards. Most turn teachers over at dramatically high rates and do not have unions—making deep, authentic reform efforts next to impossible to institutionalize.

The union wants to help teachers stay in the profession, through mentoring and feedback from parents and students.

The Los Angeles school district has begun soliciting bids from private organizations and charters for upwards of 100 schools. Supported by PEAC, UTLA worked with parents and community to write plans for schools, organize, and dominate the first round of this attempted privatization. The union/parent plans, rather than charter applications, won the vast majority of open bids.

So while PEAC and UTLA pressure the school board to end the "out for bid" policy, we also work within the policy to develop the most progressive plans possible, not only to defeat the charter chains but also to institutionalize social justice at schools.

While the largest corporate charter chains, along with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, heavily pressure the school board to give more schools to charters, PEAC hosts community forums to educate about the threat of privatization, organizes at schools affected by this policy, and works with parents to generate our own vision of school reform.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS AND TEACHING

The charter push is urged along by nonstop teacher-bashing. Recently the school district "reconstituted" a high school, scapegoating teachers and making all employees reapply for their jobs, creating enormous instability for students.

At the same time, the Los Angeles Times published teacher effectiveness rankings based solely on a standardized test-based model called "value added,"

which has been shown to have tremendous problems of reliability.

And now the mayor and school administrators, under the guise of increasing stability at schools and unfortunately aided by the ACLU, are trying to undermine seniority and introduce "value added" teacher evaluation at 45 schools, while not addressing at all the chief reasons for teacher turnover and school instability: difficult conditions for teachers to teach and students to learn.

PEAC has been a leader in demonstrating against these attacks on teachers and the union, said Rebecca Solomon, who teaches history near downtown Los Angeles, "from aggressively helping to build the UTLA picket at the Times to helping organize protests against reconstitution."

The caucus has been critical to UTLA's efforts to help teachers stay in the profession and to create teacher evaluations that are useful. This involves more time for peer support through on-site mentoring: time for teachers to observe each others' classrooms, examine student work, and provide feedback. It involves formal mechanisms for parent and student feedback to teachers.

In bargaining, the district will counter UTLA's plan with one based on "value added."

PEAC has also helped UTLA prepare contract demands around reducing teacher turnover and school instability. Teachers need to be more deeply involved in decision-making about school budgets, reform plans, and curriculum innovations. Training for teachers must be created by teachers, and vacancies should be filled in a way that builds a mix of experience levels within schools, to facilitate mentoring.

More resources should be brought to the hardest-to-staff schools and additional pay should be considered for teachers who stay at them.

While the attacks threaten to devastate the promise of a high-quality, truly public education for all, they also make clear that the only effective approach for unions is a social justice model—an approach that intentionally builds a social movement for public education and that lifts up students, communities, and teachers. □

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