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Race to the Top Era of Education Consulting: A Call to Reform the Reformers

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Abstract

As non-public entities play an increasingly pivotal role in education reform, much of school reform now rests, not in the hands of elected officials, but in the hands of private corporations with their own sets of interests and values. In this article, we describe how the “business” of education reform has worked to produce a lucrative teacher professional development market - one in which private education consulting firms increasingly take up identities as “partners” in reform. Given the magnitude of the role outside organizations play in determining the direction of education reform efforts worldwide, we have carefully studied and attended to the images and messages one such entity has presented to the public about schools and reform efforts in Tennessee, a state that was recently granted over a half billion dollars for education reform. We analyze the implicit and explicit messages about schooling and reform within publically available materials and discuss their implications for local and global reform efforts. Finally, we discuss the implications and offer a response to these images in terms of the potential for progress and for the further marginalization of already marginalized groups.

Key Words: Education reform, Race to the top, Educational equity

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Introduction

As former teachers and current educational researchers, we have watched carefully as the “business” of education reform has worked to produce a more and more lucrative teacher professional development market – one in which private education consulting firms increasingly take up identities as *partners* in reform. In this paper, we describe the ways in which the involvement of private consulting firms represents the newest trend in the business world’s involvement in education reform. We focus on the Race to the Top competition in the United States, a federal grant that has resulted in the proliferation of teacher development being created and guided by outside, business-minded organizations. More specifically, we follow one multi-million dollar contract developed to provide professional development to teachers, leaders and community stakeholders in the Race to the Top winning state of Tennessee. We focus on a publically available document that is used to describe, in this organization’s view, forces that have shaped the past, present, and future of education reform. Using this example from Tennessee, a state that is currently positioned at the “cutting edge” and is very much in the spotlight of education reform, we provide a critical analysis of the possibilities and outcomes of such partnerships, sharing our own response to the document at the end of this article. We begin with a brief overview of the role of business in education reform in the United States.

Education Reform As We Knew It: 1980-2008

During the late 1980s, President H.W. Bush, a businessman and former governor himself, sought out the Business Roundtable and the National Governors Association (NGA) for support and direction on his education policy. At the Business Roundtable’s 1989 annual meeting, Bush spoke to 200 of the most important business executives in the United States, challenging each of them to partner with a specific state to help improve schools. In 1989, Bush also held a summit of the nation’s governors in Charlottesville, Virginia. This summit became famous for two things: (1) the absence of educators and (2) the agreement to set national performance goals for education in order to boost economic productivity (Cross, 2005). This marked a shift from previous education-related legislation in which public education was positioned as an a social system responsible for social change and greater social equality (e.g. the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 as part of President Johnson’s “War on Poverty”), to positioning education as a business with student achievement, and therefore economic prosperity, viewed as its product.

Cross (2005) explained that the education summit and the goals developed there functioned to alter the focus of education policy from manipulating inputs (curriculum, student-teacher ratio, etc.) to changing outcomes and outputs. As such, the key questions regarding education quickly became: What is the education system producing? What is the cost of this production? and How well are the systems’ graduates prepared to fuel the U.S. economy? In this way, the problem of the “failing” educational system was constructed as a production problem, one in which a school ‘system’ was failing to produce students (i.e., products) with high enough

‘performance’ due to a variety of factors that could only be addressed by ‘systemic reform.’ When framed as such, it became logical for problem-oriented businessmen to lend their expertise to solve the educational problem, for now it was (presumably) a production problem. Cross further noted that the national goals for education “were a common agenda around which the business community and other civic organizations could rally” (p. 98); thus, the support, funding, and attention of the business community worked to shape the course of reform.

Ross (2001) asserted that the NGA summit in 1989 failed to set national goals or standards because of the resistance to federal interference in school decisions made at the local level. Yet, during the Clinton administration, seven years later, state governors and forty-four top business leaders were once again brought together at IBM’s conference center in New York. Their task was to define “what should be taught in local schools”, while focusing on the means by which to enforce standardized curriculum through state-mandated testing or what is now referred to as “the standards movement” (Ross, p. 711). Ross argued that standards-based educational movements illustrated how “elites manufacture crises (e.g., the widespread failure of public education) and consent (e.g., “everyone” agrees that the way to save public education is through standardized schools driven by high-stakes tests)” (p. 711). Thus, “standards” and “accountability” became common cultural buzz words linked to standards-based educational reform movements, a movement born out of collaboration between state governors and the business community.

Citing data from the National Assessment of Educational progress (NCES, 2009) many argue that the standards-based movement has done little to close achievement or increase the overall standing of U.S. schools on international achievement comparisons. Yet, outside of education there have been enormous benefits. For instance, the educational testing industry, publishing industry, and independent education consultants have benefitted greatly from the standards movement’s focus on aligned curricula and mandated testing. The National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy, housed at Boston College, reported that test sales in the 1950s created a market of about \$7 million (adjusted to 1988 dollars), and by 1997 it had increased to \$263 million annually (Clarke, Madaus, Horn & Ramos, 2001). This represents 3,000 percent growth. Indeed, growth that has not slowed in the last fourteen years. According to Simba Information (2010), a market research organization, online testing alone made up \$536 million of the U.S. educational testing market – a figure that represents only 20% of the total market in 2009. Along with new tests come test preparation materials and along with new standards come new standards-based curricula. Not surprisingly, the “four giants in testing” are also educational publishing companies (Harcourt, CTB McGraw-Hill, Pearson, Riverside) that offer textbooks, trade books and consumable practice materials to states and individual school systems. As increased accountability “reveals” states, systems, or particular schools that struggle to meet standards, there emerges an urgent incentive to try a different instructional program (buy new material), and often to hire consultants to train teachers to use the new materials.

Though education and reform have in many ways benefitted from the attention, funding, and philosophy of businesses and corporations, the question of who benefits most comes down to dollars and cents. If education is framed as an

“engine of the economy” or the “solution to economic woes,” student achievement should translate to economic growth. Unfortunately, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NCES, 2009), there has been relatively little movement in achievement over the last 40 years, and achievement gaps between races and classes remain wide. Meanwhile, testing, publishing and consulting industries have flourished. Even “non-profit” or “not-for-profit” entities benefit from the demand for educational consultants and services because it allows them to stay in business and to grow.

Framing schools as failing, especially in terms of a goal of global economic competitiveness, ensures that there is always a lucrative, perceived crisis and therefore a outside entities to offer their services. Within this impoverished view of education reform, a manufactured crisis in education functions to hide the ills of a failing social system (Berliner, 2006; Berliner & Biddle, 1996). By ignoring systemic inequities within and outside of schools these perceived educational crises, create a perpetual need for reform. In the following section, we discuss the ways in which the current culture of educational reform in the U.S. has functioned to support the involvement of outside entities in school reform, and we problematize the implications of this reality in terms of equity in education.

The Current Culture of Educational Reform

Over the last three decades, discourses surrounding educational reform have been inundated with the language of economics and business. The very purpose of schooling has increasingly centered on discussions related to preparedness for the workplace, with “career-readiness” viewed as a sign of education’s contribution to the national economy. The signature piece of education legislation from the Bush administration, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), was constructed as a set of benchmarks, mandates, and tools to ensure schools were held accountable for student achievement on annual state standardized tests – tools that included rewards and sanctions for schools that exceeded or failed to make “adequate yearly progress.” Though NCLB was overdue for reauthorization when Obama took office in 2009, Obama’s first piece of education policy was not a variation on the existing set of mandates. Rather, it was a grant competition in which U.S. states were invited to compete to win a slice of a \$4.35 billion budget by promising to engage in school reforms that aligned with certain criteria within a four-year period.

In 2009, at the height of a national economic crisis, President Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). The ARRA was designed to stimulate the economy, create new jobs and invest in “critical sectors”, such as education. The ARRA channeled \$4.35 billion to education via the Race to the Top fund– a competitive grant program designed to reward states that promise to:

...create the conditions for education innovation and reform achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, including making substantial gains in student achievement, closing achievement gaps, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring student preparation

for success in college and careers; and implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2).

Unlike funding within a reauthorized federal law, the funding outlined within this competition was time-limited, as it had to be used over a four-year period in order to jumpstart a series of reforms aimed at raising student achievement and increasing educational equity. The government called this competition “Race to the Top”, reflecting how the government would focus on supporting those who were willing to take bold and *immediate* steps to not only become “top” schools, but also win a *race* to do so. Race to the Top grant applications could earn points in the following categories in order to qualify for the millions of dollars of grant money (exact awards for winners were calculated based on state size). The criteria included:

1. State Success Factors, including evidence of statewide support and capacity for proposed reforms (worth 26% of possible points);
2. Standards and Assessments, which involved adopted a common set of high standards and a commitment to adopt aligned assessments (worth 14%);
3. Data Systems to collect and report statewide student, teacher and systems data;
4. Great Teachers and Leaders (worth 28%), which includes reforming evaluation, distribution and the preparation and development of teachers;
5. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools, which included using one of four intervention models for low-achieving schools (worth 10%); and
6. General (worth 11%), which included evidence that education funding was a state priority and that conditions were supportive of charter schools and reform efforts.

Though 40 out of 50 U.S. states applied for the money, in 2010 only two were granted funding in the first round of applications, Tennessee and Delaware. The two winners were states that promised to take on the greatest number of suggested reforms, thus earning the greatest number of possible “points” on their application while proving they had the public will and infrastructure to do so. While the winning state departments of education made many promises of radical reforms to be carried out in a four-year period, writing goals and actually enacting them in a short period of time are two entirely different tasks. Two years into the four-year grant period there have already been multiple news reports describing the difficulty in meeting the goals with fidelity to original timelines (McNeil, 2011a; McNeill, 2011b; Cavanaugh, 2010). Even a cursory analysis of the “ambitious” goals would allow most to foresee the need for extensions, if not revision. For example, Tennessee promised to develop a rigorous teacher evaluation system that would accurately identify ineffective teachers rather than continuing the counterproductive habit of rating most teachers effective. Yet the state concurrently set the goal of having more than 90% of teachers rated “effective” by 2014 so that it could claim it had “raced to the top” in terms of having great teachers and leaders. If, in their race to the top of rigorous evaluation systems, Tennessee fails to meet the goal of 90+% of teachers scoring “effective” in the next two years, a new, large professional development contract will need to be issued in order to remedy the “crisis” in teacher effectiveness. If 90% of teachers are effective within two years, though state test scores suggest some students are still

being "left behind," a new, large teacher evaluation development contract will need to be issued.

Battelle for Kids in Tennessee

Frederick Hess (2011), as quoted in Brownstein (2011), referred to Race to the Top as "No Consultant Left Behind," because of the ways in which it encourages and even forces states to avail themselves of the services of outside consultants; yet this moniker was first applied at the turn of the millennium in reference to NCLB (Ravitch, 2010). When schools faced punishments for low performance, the market for educational consultants swelled to hundreds of firms, groups, corporate arms, and individual non-profit organizations. It is still growing today. Since 2009, Race to the Top money has funded multiple, multi-million dollar contracts with outside contractors to assist state departments' of education with everything from creating new instructional standards and assessments to providing professional development and creating data systems to monitor student progress. The business of education is by no means a local endeavor housed within departments of education, local universities, district offices, or individual schools. It is a vast and lucrative national market of contractors and service providers.

In Tennessee and eight other U.S. states, as well as Hong Kong, *Battelle For Kids* (BFK) won major, multi-million dollar contracts for teacher professional development. BFK is a non-for-profit organization that was developed in 2001 with the support of a \$10 million grant from Battelle Memorial Institute and a partnership with the Ohio Business Roundtable (see <http://www.battelle.org/index.aspx>). Initially, BFK began with the purpose of improving student achievement in Ohio, and has since expanded to other locations. Given the magnitude of the role BFK and other organizations like it play in the direction of education reform efforts worldwide, we have carefully studied and attended to the images and messages they present to the public about schools and reform efforts in Tennessee, the first round Race to the Top winner. State contracts usually go to the lowest bidder, but publically available documents from the Tennessee Department of Education (DOE) state that "the state surveyed the field of education consultants capable of providing strategic development and consulting in the areas targeted by this portion of the grant application and found that BFK was the only organization with the requisite expertise to fulfill the state objectives" (Tennessee DOE, 2010). It was therefore specifically named in the Race to the Top grant proposal and went through a non-competitive contracting process. BFK's contract in Tennessee involves up to \$18,600,342 dollars (Tennessee DOE, 2010) over a four-year period (2010-2014), and falls under the teacher professional development area of Tennessee's Race to the Top budget.

It is noteworthy that this multi-million dollar contract is allocated as teacher professional development, yet does not directly address classroom instruction. The contractual scope of this work included 1) statewide assessment; 2) value-added data usage; 3) strategic compensation; 4) data systems; 5) research into effective practices of teachers and principals and 6) "support of school systems" – a generic catch-all that has so far translated to a series of workshops introducing the current reforms to teachers across the state. The first time most Tennessee teachers would have come

into contact with BFK was during a mandatory workshop that was designed and delivered across the state to all educators and educational stakeholders during the 2009-2010 school year. This was followed by the provision of two online modules for teachers to learn about formative assessment and uses of data to inform instruction.

One-size-fits-all models of professional development have long been viewed as an ineffective use of time, effort, and money (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Ball & Cohen, 2001; Gabriel, 2010; Hawley & Valli, 2001; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). Yet, developing materials that present the same, finite amount of information to all teachers instead of targeting information and support to specific teachers, schools, or districts is one of the ways in which consulting groups can (perhaps inadvertently and unintentionally) ensure the continued demand for their services. For example, BFK developed two online modules (self-paced, asynchronous, online courses) that provide basic information on formative assessments and the use of data in instructional planning for all teachers in the state. Given state-wide performance on standardized measures of achievement, it may seem logical that outside entities without specific, local knowledge would conclude that teachers within Tennessee may not know basic information about formative assessment or data-driven methods of teaching. Yet, because many teachers hold advanced degrees (Masters degrees or higher) and have passed a PRAXIS II series test (i.e., U.S. national teacher exam series which contains questions about formative assessment) in order to meet the “highly-qualified” requirement under NCLB, it is fair to assume that many teachers have some basic familiarity with such information. The question remains whether a basic level of knowledge translates into effective application. It is therefore illogical to assume that reading and answering ungraded questions about formative assessment will positively impact instructional practice. Indeed, the blanket prescription of an introductory course on formative assessment is likely to be a case of one-size-fits-few PD.

Unfortunately, providing a set of undifferentiated PD experiences as a solution to perceived lack of collective knowledge provides mild support to teachers with the least knowledge while possibly alienating others (Gabriel, 2010), and ensuring the need for continued support in the area of formative assessment. Though the organization has contractual obligations to the state department of education, the messages, methods, and materials used to fulfill this obligation during a period of intense, high profile reform are not subject to a high level of public involvement or oversight. Further, while BFK proudly points to three rounds of focus groups as public involvement in the construction of their materials, we argue that they do not necessarily know who or what they are professionally developing prior to going in to develop.

In the next section, we describe our analysis of the implicit and explicit messages about schooling and reform within materials that were made publically available as part of the BFK contract, and discuss their implications for local and global reform efforts.

Revealing Images

BFK developed and distributed a visual representation, called a “View To The Top Map” for use in statewide professional development and educational stakeholder workshops. This image is available online as a PDF file for the general public (<http://portal.battelleforkids.org/tennessee/Resources/LearningMap.html?sflang=en>). In order to analyze the publically available messages about schooling and reform, we engaged in a visual analysis (Saldana, 2009) of BFK’s “View from the Top” map. We took an interpretive approach to making sense of the visual representation. Like Saldana (2009) suggested, we analyzed the image by documenting, “through field notes and analytic memos,” the initially striking features (p. 43). Further, as we analyzed the document, we asked the following questions: “What work is the image doing in the world? What is implicitly and explicitly normalized?” (Clarke, 2005, pp. 227-228). More particularly, we attended closely to the ways in which race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability were positioned with the image, particularly in that this document worked to frame the past, present and future of Tennessee schools as well as to frame and provide referents for reform.

To begin a visual analysis of the document, we downloaded the image, saving it into Atlas.titm, a qualitative analysis software program that allowed us to create and share annotations of the image. First, we independently observed the image, noting our impressions and questions as “analytic memos.” Then, in response to the structure of three panels presenting the past, present, and future of education reform, we specifically attended to what remained constant and what changed in the images of classrooms in each of the three panels. We listed the changes, as well as the objects and players, taking note of how people and objects were positioned as well as what was present and absent in the scenes surrounding views of the three classrooms. Finally, we constructed a written description of the map, based on our analysis, constructing our description as if it was being written to the developers at BFK.

An Image of Reform

While BFK’s map is only one amongst many images that highlight the current messages surrounding education reform, we believe this image provides a clear example of the ways in which issues fundamental to educational reform have been evaded within a sustained educational crisis. We view the implicit and explicit images and messages on the map as evidence of a growing trend in contemporary education reforms that take up the notion that schools “used to work” (at least to some extent), but now have stopped working because of family, economic and job market shifts. As noted on the website, it is intended to be an “integrative engagement tool” designed to engage various stakeholders in understanding upcoming reform efforts and their roles in them. This document also illustrates BFK’s priorities and interpretation of the root causes of the current education difficulties. It highlights economic globalization and technological advancements, while also depicting versions of an idyllic past and utopian future. Furthermore, specific versions of “educators”, “students”, “learning”,

“parents/families”, etc. are presented – these constructions of educational stakeholders are what first drew us to analyze this document.

For example, the map presents an image of a shifting family structure, with the “past” family represented by a two parent, mono-racial family. The image labeled “traditional family” consists as a mother and father, each with a baby in their arms. It stands in contrast to what was displayed as the families of the present. The present shows two images set parallel to the “traditional family.” One is labeled “home alone,” and it shows a child staring at a TV screen with no adults in sight. A second is labeled “single parent family,” and is represented by a woman sitting alone in front a computer screen with no child insight. Changes in typical family structures are neither new, nor uniquely responsible for unequal educational opportunities. Yet, in the context of the map, notions of single-parent families and a changing economy were (perhaps unintentionally) linked with a need for reform, with increased community involvement and the integration of technology positioned as reform solutions. Though positive, such efforts merely build on top of a troubled system of education that has never yet been successful at educating *all* who come to learn. They further construct negative images of single parent and working-parent homes as if they represent a deterioration of the family structure that was once responsible for a golden age in education.

Though there were many hopeful constructions of education reform efforts included on the map such as images of community partnerships, access to technology, and multiracial classrooms, we were troubled by the absence of many factors that we, as educators, know have created and continue to sustain unequal opportunities for children in U.S. public schools. There is, for example, no images referencing the role of outside-of-school factors such as poverty, nutrition, mobility, and security. There is no image of the stratification of classrooms or the overrepresentation of minority students in lower-tracked classrooms (Eitle, 2002); the overrepresentation of black males in special education classrooms (Beratan, 2008; Donovan, & Cross, 2002) or the academic and disciplinary systems which work to create a school-to-prison pipeline by pushing out low-performing, under-supported learners and even schools (CDC, 2007). There are no images of the unequal distribution of qualified teachers; the teacher shortages in areas like special education, English Language Learning, and the sciences; or the unequal working conditions and school environments that exist even within a single district. Further, while an image of a child with a physical impairment is present (within the “present” category), this image alone fails to touch upon the challenges and resistance that inclusive education still faces (Brantlinger, 1997) and the proliferation of disability labels and special education referrals.

Contrary to the view that there was once a golden age of equality in education, there was no such past. As Rothstein (2004) noted, school reform requires considering the social and economic gaps that have sustained and contributed to inequitable education. He noted that:

For nearly half a century, the association of social and economic disadvantage with a student achievement gap has been well known to economists, sociologists and educators. Most, however, have avoided the obvious implication of this understanding-raising the achievement

of lower-class children requires the amelioration of the social and economic conditions of their lives, not just school reform. (p. 11)

Reform efforts that frame reform as a way to catch up to the ever-changing economy, rather than as an opportunity to confront the unexamined assumptions that lead to systemic inequities in the educational opportunities of children of different races, classes, genders, abilities, and regions of the U.S. will never result in a truly reformed system. Evading the ways in which daily practices and taken-for-granted assumptions function to construct and perpetuate inequities along the lines of race, ethnicity, class, geography, and disability status (Anyon, 2007; Ferguson, 2000) serves to sustain unexamined institutionalized practices and avoid the “tough” issues that educational reform can and should be addressing.

While the instruments used by some education consulting firms purport to promote equity, most often citing the use of value-added modeling to ‘control for individual differences’ in terms of student achievement and teacher effectiveness (e.g., Los Angeles Times, 2010), we suggest that without conversations focused on the everyday practices and policies that construct and sustain inequities, such tools are irrelevant. Data, even data purported to “level the playing field”, has a story behind it; and it is the story, not the data alone, that needs to be shared with all stakeholders. So, as non-public entities play an increasingly pivotal role in education reform, much of school reform begins to rest, not in the hands of local or elected officials, but in the hands of private corporations with their own sets of interests and values – which are often transplanted from different states or even countries. As outside entities, educational consultants are often only loosely connected and even less accountable to local stakeholders. Further, they stand to benefit from methods, materials and processes that sustain the need for reform. We therefore conclude this article by sharing an open letter that we sent to BFK following our analysis of the map. We share it as an example of the ways in which readers might organize efforts to push back on what we see as a growing trend of problematic messages being sent about the ills and solutions associated with school reform by the very organizations that have been hired to support reform.

To Whom It May Concern:

Over the course of the 2010-2011 school year, Battelle For Kids has presented professional development workshops for all public school teachers and administrators, as well as some community stakeholders in Tennessee. These presentations have included your “View From The Top” — a map describing the past, present, and future of schools in Tennessee. We share your view of “the top” in which “all students graduate on time college and career ready.” It was this word *all* that inspired us to write to you today. Our experiences teaching in and studying U.S. public schools compels us to suggest that in order to get to “the top” there are some things that cannot be left off the map. Unexamined assumptions about race, disability, class, and geography, create and sustain systemic inequities in educational policies and everyday practices. We suggest that addressing these trends, the ones not represented in your “view”, are vital to the success of our efforts towards equity and opportunity.

For example, teachers may benefit from some of your online modules about formative assessment, but what good is an understanding of formative assessment in classrooms where expectations and conversations create a reality in which some students, and their very cultural values, ways of being and ways of learning, are dis-privileged, ignored, and even silenced? A “Race to the Top” must involve the deconstruction of all that has always kept us from reaching the utopia you describe for Tennessee’s future.

We further argue that changes in family structures—as you highlighted with a two-parent, mono-racial couple with two children in the “past” in contrast to a “single, working parent” (family) represented by a child sitting alone in front of a computer screen—are neither new, nor uniquely responsible for unequal educational opportunities. In the context of the map, notions of single-parent families and a changing economy become linked with a need for reform, with increased community involvement and the integration of technology are positioned as reform solutions. Though positive, such efforts merely build on top of a troubled system of education that has never yet been successful at educating *all* who come to learn.

Contrary to the view you present of the past, there never was a golden age of educational equity. We hope that as you continue to partner with the state of Tennessee that you lead us in a conversation that identifies and deconstructs the “trends” that are not as comfortable to talk about or easy to understand as those described in the map. We commend many of the elements you included in your visual representation, as you offered thoughtful, hopeful constructions of what could happen in classrooms. We call for images of (1) students with access to intervention and enrichment programs that honor their ways of learning and ensure they experience success; (2) parents and teachers contributing equally to goals that are set for student learning; and (3) students having equitable access to healthcare, shelter, and mentors so that they can focus and thrive in their school settings. We look forward to seeing materials that engage with the social realities that sustain inequity, rather than merely building upon systems that have always been unequal.

Sincerely,

Rachael Gabriel and Jessica Lester

Conclusion

Since the 1980s, business has played a prominent role in framing and determining the function of education reform. Beginning with the insinuation of business philosophies, taxonomies, and practices centered on the processes of everyday schooling, and continuing with the support of policies that create booming testing, publishing, and consulting markets, the role of business in education continues to grow. Education reform now consists of hundreds of consultants and contractors who offer support to local entities to which they may have limited involvement or accountability. States and local entities have been encouraged to promise reforms they likely cannot carry out on their own, particularly within timeframes that require multiple, large contracts with outside contractors. Thus, the power of consultants and

contractors to shape conversations and initiatives around issues of access, equity, and excellence in schools is unprecedented. What began as gatherings of the leading businessmen and politicians of our time has now evolved into a market driven model of educational reform.

We suggest that an important first step toward reform efforts that benefit schools is found in calling for corporate entities to focus on rethinking equity and opportunity as results of the beliefs and assumptions that guide the everyday practices of individuals involved in schooling. Such considerations would require consultants to engage in grassroots efforts to challenge long-held beliefs about diverse students' abilities, potential, and worth, mediating the practices that currently marginalize some and privilege others. Such work would begin by deconstructing unequal systems, rather than spending millions of dollars to simply build on top of systems that sustain inequities in superficial and unsustainable ways.

We invite readers to act as critical consumers of the products and services of private educational contractors; keeping in mind that their positions as "partners" in reform often represent unequal partnerships that ensure a perpetual need for such services, rather than working towards genuine and lasting change of historically unequal systems. Finally, in hopes of sparking a conversation and moving towards reform of the so-called reformers, we share the above letter voicing our concerns. We offer this letter as one amongst many ways that others might respond to those who work, even with the best intentions, to corporatize education. We encourage readers to initiate their own responses to reform movements that might benefit from a more inclusive and complex view of the past, present, and future of public education.

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