

Title: The Intended Consequences of the DFER Education Agenda

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DFER History and Background

The purpose of this report is to expose that the education platform of the Democrats for Education is not one rooted in research or supportive of sound pedagogical practice. In their mission statement the organization claims to be the champions of high-quality public education for every child, but we will show that much of what they champion, regarding policies and positions, are not rooted in best practices. We believe that hedge fund managers, business executives, and privately-run corporations should not be involved in creating or implementing education policy. Teachers, administrators, parents, communities, and elected school boards should be the stakeholders responsible for creating and implementing education policy in this country.

The Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) was founded in 2007 by hedge fund managers, including Whitney Tilson, R. Boykin Curry IV, and John Petry. Democrats for Education Reform is a political action committee that uses its immense wealth to lobby for specific policies in public education. In some states, DFER is called Education Reform NOW. Former T.V. reporter Joe Williams was the first executive director of Democrats for Education Reform (2007 to 2015). The organization is now led by Shavar Jeffries. The Board of Directors and Advisory Board of this hedge-fund-financed political action committee includes some of the top managers in the country. As Danielle Beurteaux noted, “Boykin Curry of Eagle Capital, Charles Ledley of Highfields Capital Man. Whitney Tilson of T2 Partners, David Einhorn of Greenlight Capital, Michael Novogratz of Fortress Investment Group, Greenblatt and Petry on its director and advisory boards” (Beurteaux, 2011).

Whitney Tilson stated in the film, *A Right Denied*, “The real problem, politically, was not the Republican Party, it was the Democratic Party. So it dawned on us, over the course of six months or a year, that it had to be an inside job. The biggest obstacle to education reform was moving the Democratic Party, and it had to be Democrats who did it, it had to be an inside job. So that was the thesis behind the organization. And the name – and the name was critical – we get a lot of flack for the name. You know, ‘Why are you Democrats for education reform? That’s very exclusionary. I mean, certainly, there are Republicans in favor of education reform.’ And we said, ‘We agree.’ In fact, our natural allies, in many cases, are Republicans on this crusade, but the problem is not Republicans. We don’t need to convert the Republican Party to our point of view...”

(Haimson, 2011). Lisa Graves, in her article for PR Watch, *“How DFER Leaders Channel Out-of-State Dark Money”*, wrote, “DFER co-founder...Whitney Tilson explained the hedge funders interest in education noting that “Hedge funds are always looking for ways to turn a small amount of capital into a large amount of capital” (Graves, 2016).

DFER defines their organization: “We are Democrats leading a political reform organization that cultivates and supports leaders in our party who champion America’s public schoolchildren.” Their vision as stated on their website is, “To make the Democratic Party the champion of high-quality public education.” Their education vision involves test-based accountability for students and teachers, school choice and vouchers, support of Common Core, and private (charter) schools funded by public money (Democrats for Education Reform, 2016). Democrats for Education Reform currently has chapters in eleven states. Most of the state directors and staff are business people or persons with ties to organizations whose understanding and commitment to public education was difficult to identify beyond their profit motive.

DFER staff/board of advisors with business/corporate backgrounds (Democrats for Education Reform, About Us, 2016 <https://dfer.org/about-us/>)

Victor Contreras (AZ), real estate

Marti Awad (CO), founding partner Cardan Capital Partners - securities, mergers, acquisitions law firm

Patrick Byrne (CO), CEO of Overstock

Josh Hanfling (CO), co-founder of Sewald Hanfling - public affairs firm, former member of Clinton Global Initiative

Hollie Velasquez Horvath (CO), manager of political engagement for Xcel Energy

Tom Kaesemeyer (CO), Executive Director, Fox Family Foundation

Jason Andean (DC, assistant vice president and relationship manager at Capital One Commercial Bank

Joy Arnold Russell (DC), founder of Jonathan Arnold Consulting

Victor Reinoso (DC), Senior Advisor to Bellwether Education Partners, an Entrepreneur in Residence at the NewSchools Venture Fund, and the co-founder of Decision Science Labs, a K-12 analytics and budgeting platform, investor and advisor to leading edtech startups including TenMarks, LearnZillion and Ellevation Education

Liam Kerr, management consultancy The Parthenon Group and the national venture philanthropy fund New Profit, Inc.

DFER staff/board of advisors with ties to corporate education reform:

Rhonda Cagle (AZ), Chief Communications & Development Officer, Imagine Schools (charter management corporation)

Lindsay Neil (CO), Chief External Affairs Officer Strive Preparatory (Charter) Schools

Mary Seawell, (CO), Senior Vice President of Education, Gates Family Foundation

Amy Dowell (CT), prior director for StudentsFirst in NY

Catharine Bellinger, (DC Students for Education Reform, KIPP

Jason Andrean (DC), chairman of the proposed Legacy Collegiate Academy Public Charter School

Mikaela Seligman (DC), The Broad Center for the Management of School Systems

Shawn Hardnett (DC), a founding teacher and administrator for KIPP Bayview Academy in San Francisco, CA; later served as Founder and Head of School at the first single gender academy within the KIPP Network, KIPP Polaris Academy for Boys in Houston Texas; past Director of Charter Leadership Development; served as Chief of Schools for both Friendship Public Charter Schools and Center City Public Charter Schools; currently partnered with the DC Fund of New Schools Venture Fund

Maya Martin (DC), Chief of Staff at Achievement Prep (charter management corporation)

Paula White (NJ), charter school founder, previous member of NJ Charter School Task Force

Nicole Brisbane (NY), Teach for America (TFA)

Natasha Kamrani (TN), Teach For America (TFA)

Jennifer Kohn Koppel, (TX vice-president of Growth for IDEA Public Schools (charter management corporation)

The list above represents more than 75% of the DFER staff and board of advisors. As seen from the list above DFER is clearly not a group of individuals who should be working on legislation to protect and provide for our public school system. For a complete list of the candidates that DFER currently supports, visit their website (<https://dferlist.org/page/candidates>).

DFER Supports the Expansion of Private Schools Funded by Public Money (Charter Schools)

One of the main platforms of DFER is support of charter schools. In August of 2015, the delegates for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) issued a statement recommending a moratorium on charters, demonstrating critical and thoughtful leadership. (Heilig, 2016) DFER quickly refuted this resolution by stating, “Across the country, particularly in our urban communities, public charter schools are a beacon of hope that empower parents and families with greater control over their child’s future.” (Jeffries, 2016) On October 15, 2016, the NAACP Board of Directors issued a moratorium on charters schools nationwide (NAACP, 2016).

It has, however, been found that private schools funded by public money (charters) are ripe with fraud and mismanagement. (Strauss, 2015) It has been noted that charters sort and segregate students. In *The Dirty Dozen: How Charter Schools Influence Student Enrollment*, Kevin Welner points out that, “the patterns are particularly stark when we realize that such at-risk students are disproportionately enrolled in a small subset of ‘mission-oriented’ charters – those dedicated to serving a particular type of at-risk student” (Welner, 2013). Welner also shared that journalist Stephanie Simon discovered how charters “cherry pick” the students they want. Simon noted that “applications are made available just a few hours a year, there is a lengthy application form that is often printed only in English.” Simon further revealed that charters require “student and parent essays, report cards, test scores, disciplinary records, teacher recommendations and medical records.” Charters also demand that “students present Social Security cards and birth certificates for their applications to be considered, even

though such documents cannot be required under Federal law.” Even more egregious, Simon points out that for students to get their spot in a charter school lottery they must have “Mandatory family interviews, assessment exams, academic prerequisites, and requirements that applicants document any disabilities or special needs.” (in Welner, 2013)

Frankenberg, Hawley, and Wang stated in *Choice without Equity: Charter School Segregation and the Need for Civil Rights Standards*, “as the country continues moving steadily toward greater segregation and inequality of education for students of color in schools with lower achievement and graduation rates, the rapid growth of charter schools has been expanding a sector that is even more segregated than the public schools. The Civil Rights Project has been issuing annual reports on the spread of segregation in public schools and its impact on educational opportunity for 14 years. The report states, “We know that choice programs can either offer quality educational options with racially and economically diverse schooling to children who otherwise have few opportunities or choice programs can increase stratification and inequality depending on how they are designed. The charter effort, which has largely ignored the segregation issue, has been justified by claims about superior educational performance, which simply are not sustained by the research. Though there are some remarkable and diverse charter schools, most are neither. The lessons of what is needed to make choice work have usually been ignored in charter school policy. Magnet schools are the striking example of and offer a great deal of experience in how to create educationally successful and integrated choice options” (Frankenberg, 2012).

One has to wonder, given the preponderance of evidence, why DFER has not backed away from their support of charter schools, like the NAACP, ACLU, and Black Lives Matter who have all issued a moratorium on charters, and focus their resources toward a rebuilding of community public schools designed for all children (Katayama, 2016). Knowing the history and background of DFER’s board members, this is unlikely to happen. Funneling money out of public education and into charter schools guides their decision-making practices, not educational theories and pedagogy.

DFER Supports the Use of Standardized Tests for Accountability

DFER supposedly was founded based on the need to make schools more accountable for meeting the needs of all students. DFER took a readily available tool, standardized tests, and pushed them into the spotlight with the claim that they would be the panacea to identifying schools with poor performance, thereby allowing them to be labeled as “failing.” DFER’s continued emphasis on testing ignores sound educational practice and

learning theories, and denies the fact that basic human needs must be met for effective learning to occur in the classroom. However, what they have failed to do is to effectively put any legislation into action that provides necessary resources to school districts that are in need of funding to provide pathways to provide the “wrap-around” services that students need. In doing this, the organization can deny their culpability in the failure of our government to create a system of supports and services that raise each generation to become healthier and more self-sufficient, with the needs of the collective population as the driving force of improvement.

In an attempt to give credit to standardized testing, DFER created an infographic to show how parents feel about standardized tests (Democrats for Education Reform, 2015). Missing from this graphic is information that shows the effectiveness of standardized tests in increasing a student’s educational performance. Also missing is information about how using standardized tests has brought more resources to classrooms or improved teaching methods. Of course, data and infographics showing how these improvements were brought about by standardized tests are not being promoted because no such data exists! DFER was only able to create this particular infographic because parents have been fed the myth that the use of these tests for accountability is the answer to what they perceive as an educational issue, distracting them from the real issue of poverty and inequity in our nation. Instead, as stated in their reaffirmation of belief in the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) exam, DFER wants us to believe that high expectations and rigor are the keys to preparing students for the future, that some educators really don’t want parents to know how their students are doing, and that a computer test is the true measure of a student’s preparedness for life after high school (LeBuhn, Barone, 2014).

DFER Refuses to Acknowledge that Standardized Testing Does Not Close the Achievement/Opportunity Gap

Instead of being the key to a better education, when analyzing the results of standardized tests, several studies have shown that standardized testing does not close the achievement gap. Nichols, Glass, and Berliner used an Accountability Pressure Index to measure state-level policy pressure for performance on standardized testing, and correlations between high-stakes testing accountability and student performance. Their findings show that the achievement gap is not reduced by the use of standardized tests. Specifically, African-American students had the lowest average NAEP scores in both fourth and eighth-grade math.

Additionally, the authors noted that fourth and eighth-grade average math scores rose more dramatically before NCLB than after. Also noted is the fact that pressure for high performance from 2004 is associated with decreased performance in math for the years 2005-2009. The authors of this study state that it 's hard to form a definite conclusion regarding the relationship of accountability pressure and student achievement. We maintain that this finding alone is evidence that the overemphasis on standardized testing needs to be decreased, especially in a time where budgetary decision-making results in the allocation of more funds towards testing, and fewer funds toward programs and services that directly help students and their families (Nichols, Glass, and Berliner, 2012).

Furthermore, in *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Metaphor for Children Left Behind*, Giroux and Schmidt found that, “when state tests are viewed as the sole indicator of student learning, especially when attached to academic promotion and high school exit criteria, less than positive effects on students’ opportunities for learning have been reported.” The authors further contend that “The most fundamental element of school reform is improving educational opportunities for all children who attend public schools, but this would demand more than simply tougher accountability schemes, expanded choice programs and more testing.” Giroux and Schmidt reference Gutman (2000) when calling for powerful systemic education reforms for all children, specifically underserved children that DFER members continue to ignore. Gutman makes the following recommendations: “decreasing class size, expanding preschool programs, setting high standards for all students, engaging students in cooperative learning exercises, empowering principals and teachers to innovate, increasing social services offered to students and their families, and providing incentives to the ablest college students to enter the teaching profession and, in particular, to teach in inner city schools” (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004).

DFER also promotes the use of standardized testing to evaluate teacher quality, while ignoring the trauma that underserved children come to school with on a daily basis, trauma that adversely impacts test scores. Recent research has shown that trauma experienced during childhood can impact concentration, memory and language development that children need to be successful in school. The foundation that a child needs for learning, the ability to form relationships, trust, and communication skills can be affected, resulting in lower assessment results. To rate teachers based upon a test that does not account for these facts is not a valid measurement of a teacher’s ability to teach. (“Traumatic experiences can impact learning,” 2016) The American Statistical Association noted in 2014 that, “most VAM studies find that teachers account for about 1% to 14% of the variability in test scores and that the majority of opportunities for

quality improvement are found in the system-level conditions. Ranking teachers by their VAM scores can have unintended consequences that reduce quality” (American Statistical Association, 2014). Children who are poor come to school with the trauma of food insecurity, shelter insecurity, and family disruption. For teachers who teach in high-needs districts with high populations of underserved children, this is a recipe for disaster for the child, the teacher, and the district.

The Economic Policy Institute’s *Problems with the Use of Student Test Scores to Evaluate Teachers* found that “there is not strong evidence to indicate either that the departing teachers would be the weakest teachers, or that the departing teachers would be replaced by more effective ones. There is also little or no evidence for the claim that teachers will be more motivated to improve student learning if teachers are evaluated or monetarily rewarded for student test score gains.” On evaluating teachers using test scores, the report also contends that,

“VAM (Value Added Measure) estimates have proven to be unstable across statistical models, years, and classes that teachers teach. One study found that across five large urban districts, among teachers who were ranked in the top 20% of effectiveness in the first year, fewer than a third were in that top group the next year, and another third moved all the way down to the bottom 40%. Another found that teachers’ effectiveness ratings in one year could only predict from 4% to 16% of the variation in such ratings in the following year. Thus, a teacher who appears to be very ineffective in one year might have a dramatically different result the following year. The same dramatic fluctuations were found for teachers ranked at the bottom in the first year of analysis. This runs counter to most people’s notions that the true quality of a teacher is likely to change very little over time and raises questions about whether what is measured is largely a ‘teacher effect’ or the effect of a wide variety of other factors.”

On student achievement, the authors state that “ these factors also include school conditions—such as the quality of curriculum materials, specialist or tutoring supports, class size, and other factors that affect learning. Schools that have adopted pull-out, team teaching, or block scheduling practices will only inaccurately be able to isolate individual teacher ‘effects’ for evaluation, pay, or disciplinary purposes. Student test score gains are also strongly influenced by school attendance and a variety of out-of-school learning experiences at home, with peers, at museums and libraries, in summer programs, online, and in the community. Well educated and supportive parents can help their children with homework and secure a wide variety of other advantages for them. Other children have parents who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to support their learning academically. Student test score gains are also influenced by family

resources, student health, family mobility, and the influence of neighborhood peers and of classmates who may be relatively more advantaged or disadvantaged” (Baker et al., 2010).

Linda Darling-Hammond noted in *Can Value Added Add Value to Teacher Evaluation?* that “the most tragic outcome will be if VAM measures are used to ensure a spread in the ratings of teachers so as to facilitate dismissals, but the teachers who are fired are not the ‘incompetent deadwood’ imagined by advocates. Instead, they are the teachers working with the most challenging students in the most challenging contexts and those whose students are so far ahead of the curve the tests have no items to measure their gains, and perhaps those who eschew test prep in favor of more exciting, but less testable, learning experiences. If value-added measures continue to prove untrustworthy, the likelihood that they can be used to improve the quality of teaching, or of the teaching force, will be remote” (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

One need only to reference the case of New York teacher Sheri Lederman to note the ineffective nature of VAM and its ability to distinguish teacher quality. Dr. Lederman, an award-winning teacher, sued the New York State Department of Education over her evaluation score. Valerie Strauss highlighted the case on her blog, “The Answer Sheet”, for The Washington Post. Strauss noted the history of the suit: “In 2012-13, 68.75 percent of her New York students met or exceeded state standards in both English and math. She was labeled ‘effective’ that year. In 2013-2014, her students’ test results were very similar, but she was rated ‘ineffective.’ Meanwhile, her district superintendent, Thomas Dolan, declared that Lederman — whose students received standardized math and English Language Arts test scores consistently higher than the state average — has a ‘flawless record.’” Strauss further noted that “Lederman’s suit against state education officials — including King — challenges the rationality of the VAM model, and it alleges that the New York State Growth Measures actually punishes excellence in education through a statistical black box which no rational educator or fact finder could see as fair, accurate or reliable.” In May 2015, New York Supreme Court Judge Roger McDonough ruled that Lederman’s evaluation was “arbitrary” and “capricious” (Strauss, 2015).

In the larger context, the DFER support of test-based evaluations for teachers is not only flawed but dangerous to children and public education. Promotion of such policies that educational experts repeatedly demonstrate as flawed can arguably be considered educational malpractice. Since most of DFER members are hedge funders, this approach to teacher evaluation would be like firing a trader based on one day of performance on Wall Street.

DFER Supports Common Core

Part of the myth that DFER tries to sell is that there is a “magic bullet” answer for what they feel is wrong with our schools. DFER tries to tell the public that if our schools have more “rigorous” standards that are composed of more “grit”, our students will be better prepared to compete in the future workforce. They tout these reforms as “necessary recalibration”. (Johnson, 2013)

Hiebert and Mesmer noted in *Upping the Ante of Text Complexity in the Common Core State Standards: Examining Its Potential Impact on Young Readers* that the drive to set the bar so high in the younger grades, as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) does, will have more negative consequences than positive results. Hiebert and Mesmer state strongly that, “we believe that the evidence cited by CCSS writers to verify declining levels of text complexity pertains to middle and high schools, not the primary grades. Some overgeneralizations of the textbook simplification research have resulted in large changes in the primary grades. The early acceleration of text complexity takes the focus off of secondary level where the patterns of declining challenges in texts have been clear and consistent for a 40-year period” (Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013).

Hiebert and Mesmer found “text that the CCSS offers as an exemplar for the Grades 2–3 band—*Bats: Creatures of the Night* (Milton, 1993)—has the same mean log word frequency as an exemplar for the Grades 11–12 CCR band—*Common Sense* (Paine, 1776/2005).” In regard to making young children deal with such high level text complexity, they further stated, “at present, there is research indicating that motivation decreases when tasks become too challenging and none that indicates that increasing challenge (and potential levels of failure) earlier in students’ careers will change this dismal national pattern of disengagement with literacy.” (Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012)

In *The Common Core State Standards' Quantitative Text Complexity Trajectory : Figuring Out How Much Complexity Is Enough*, Williamson, Fitzgerald and Stenner point out: “The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) set a controversial aspirational, quantitative trajectory for text complexity exposure for readers throughout the grades, aiming for all high school graduates to be able to independently read complex college and workplace texts. However, the trajectory standard is presented without reference to how the grade-by-grade complexity ranges were determined or rationalized, and little guidance is provided for educators to know how to apply the flexible quantitative text exposure standard in their local contexts. We extend and elaborate the CCSS presentation and discussion, proposing that decisions about shifting quantitative text

complexity levels in schools requires more than implementation of a single, static standard” (2013). Finally, with the emphasis on reading and math, and increased “test prep” for standardized testing, the fine arts have been pushed out of schools across America. Alice Wexler states in *Reaching Higher? The Impact of the Common Core State Standards on the Visual Arts, Poverty, and Disabilities*: “While the numbing conformism of the Common Core State Standards that has transformed education into test preparation puts all children at risk, the poor and the disabled are inevitably its target. While all children need the arts, these populations are socially and psychically equalized and empowered by them. Children who flourish when engaged in autonomous acts of discovery, experimentation, and hypothetical thinking rather than passive submission to expository teaching, might not necessarily succeed in academics, let alone meet the unreasonable demands of the new tests. Educators need to believe in the educational merits of unpredictability, uncertainty, and risk-taking, all of which good art teachers embrace” (Wexler, 2014).

DFER’s continued support of the CCSS, which has not been adequately researched or vetted, speaks to the organization’s lack of knowledge about the complexity of educating children. The continued push by DFER members, and groups that they finance, for the untested CCSS has had a detrimental impact on teaching and learning in the United States. If the CCSS are so amazing, one has to ask why private schools that do not have to adhere to CCSS are not suffering the challenges of achievement gap. CCSS is not a solution, rather a symptom of a misdiagnosis of the real issue.

DFER Perpetuates a “Failing Schools” Narrative

One of DFER’s most significant accomplishments to date was the feat of pulling the wool over everyone’s eyes, shifting the blame from where it should be (i.e., the failure of the government to fully fund schools, provide necessary resources, and address structural poverty), and placing it in the schools themselves. DFER blog posts and position statements are full of language that perpetuates the failing schools rhetoric. After two years of failing to meet annual yearly progress, a school is identified as a “school in need of improvement”. Lists of these schools are published and plans made to overhaul the current systems in place, with sometimes drastic changes, that potentially destroy recent progress. When responding to the recent passage of the ESSA legislation, DFER praised the legislation for the maintaining of annual statewide testing and funding to new differential pay and human capital management systems for teachers and principals (Barone, 2015) despite the fact that there is no evidence to support annual testing as improving educational outcomes.

What has been created in our nation is a constant market of supply and demand for our corporate education suppliers that sell products offering the magic-bullet solution for remediation to learners that perform poorly on standardized assessments. Schools are encouraged to purchase new curriculums, supplemental materials, technology hardware or software, classroom management systems, or hire consultants; all of which can be done, for a price. When that is not enough, new benchmarks are created, proficiency score levels are changed, and revised standardized tests are created, giving birth to a resurgence of the education product market.

Monetary resources for education should be spent in ways that will truly benefit students. Published by the Albert Shanker Institute, a report by Bruce D. Baker explores the question, “Does money matter in education?” One of his conclusions states that: “Schooling resources that cost money, including smaller class sizes, additional supports, early childhood programs and more competitive teacher compensation (permitting schools and districts to recruit and retain a higher-quality teacher workforce), are positively associated with student outcomes. Again, in some cases, those effects are larger than in others, and there is also variation in student population and other contextual variables. On the whole, however, the things that cost money benefit students, and there is scarce evidence that there are more cost-effective alternatives” (Baker, 2016).

Card and Payne further contend in *School Finance Reform, the Distribution of School Spending, and the Distribution of SAT Scores* that spending equalizations that occurred in 12 states in the 1980s after unconstitutional court rulings resulted in children from highly-educated and low-educated parents closing the gap in SAT average by 5% (or 8 points) (Card & Payne, 1998). Downes and Figlio further support this finding by showing that the test scores of high school seniors in low spending districts rose after a court-mandated and legislatively induced finance reform (Downes & Figlio, 1997).

Glaringly absent from the DFER “What We Stand For” statement is any mention of the following items, as recommended by the National Education Policy Center in 2014:

- Class size is an important determinant of student outcomes and one that can be directly determined by policy. All else being equal, increasing class sizes will harm student outcomes.
- The evidence suggests that increasing class size will harm not only children’s test scores in the short run, but also their long-run human capital formation. Money saved

today by increasing class sizes will result in more substantial social and educational costs in the future.

- The payoff from class-size reduction is greater for low-income and minority children, while any increases in class size will likely be most harmful to these populations.
- Policymakers should weigh the efficacy of class-size policy against other potential uses of funds carefully. While lower class size has a demonstrable cost, it may prove the more cost-effective policy overall. (Schanzenbach, 2014)

When discussing education policy-making and how it is conducted, another glaring void is apparent within DFER. Missing from their conversations are a call for the most important stakeholders of education to have a prominent voice in policy writing and decision making: teachers, parents, and students. Their focus on testing without equal attention towards creating spaces for stakeholder input and collaboration on solutions allows them to perpetuate the narrative of failing schools.

DFER Believes our Public School Systems are in Decline

Another part of the DFER narrative is that our school system is in decline. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a test that was designed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development to test the skills and knowledge of 15-year old students. Prominent education historian, Dr. Diane Ravitch, notes, “Never do they explain how it was possible for the U.S. to score so poorly on international tests again and again over the past half century and yet still emerge as the world’s leading economy, with the world’s most vibrant culture, and a highly productive workforce. From my vantage point as a historian, here is my takeaway from the PISA scores: Lesson 1: If they mean anything at all, the PISA scores show the failure of the past dozen years of public policy in the United States. The billions invested in testing, test prep, and accountability have not raised test scores or our nation’s relative standing on the league tables. No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top are manifest failures at accomplishing their singular goal of higher test scores” (Ravitch, 2013).

Furthermore, Des Griffin points out in *What’s wrong with PISA: Why condemning international tests is a distraction, and what we really should be worried about* that “there are other lessons aimed at the US coming from PISA rankings that perhaps the US, and other countries such as Australia, should be paying attention to. How many times does it have to be pointed out that ‘socio-economic disadvantage has a notable impact on student performance’”? Also, PISA 2009 asserted local funding of education

exacerbates inequality and ‘may be the single most important factor for the US.’ But it seems impossible for Americans to come to grips with these findings” (Griffin, 2015).

Democrats for Education Reform continues to ignore researchers, who repeatedly point out that the U.S. system of education must address inequality, and that inequity has been detrimental to education policy and public education. DFER billions fund local, state, and federal political races and use “the sky is falling” rhetoric to fuel their continued efforts to control public education. As a result, we have seen elected lawmakers, funded by DFER money, work to slash school aid budgets. DFER continues to ignore that equity funding is essential to help our most struggling students and schools. They continue to influence these lawmakers to slash public education budgets in their states, starving the schools of the resources they need to operate. Decreased class sizes and more certified teachers per pupil are resources that increase the value of school for all children, especially for our most needy children.

In *Evaluating the Recession’s Impact on School Finance Systems*, Bruce Baker notes, “the recent recession yielded an unprecedented decline in public school funding fairness. Thirty-six states had a three-year average reduction in current spending fairness between 2008-09 and 2010-11 and 32 states had a three-year average reduction in state and local revenue fairness over that same period. Over the entire 19-year period, only 15 states saw an overall decline in spending fairness. In years before 2008 (starting in 1993), only 11 states saw an overall decline in spending fairness.” Baker further contends that “while equity overall took a hit between 1997 and 2011, the initial state of funding equity varied widely at the outset of the period, with Massachusetts and New Jersey being among the most progressively funded states in 2007. Thus, they arguably had further to fall. Funding equity for many states has barely budged over time, and remained persistently regressive, for example in Illinois, New York, and Pennsylvania” (Baker, 2014).

Baker, Farrie, and Sciara contend in *The Changing Distribution of Educational Opportunities: 1993–2012* that, “over the past ten years, state average staffing increases have been much more modest, and over the past five years, nonexistent.” They further point out that, “equity and adequacy of financial inputs to schooling across states are required if we ever expect to achieve more equitable access to a highly qualified teacher workforce (as dictated in part by the competitiveness of their compensation) and reasonable class sizes” (Baker, Farrie, and Sciarra, 2016).

As we have seen over the last decade, corporate education reform proponents such as DFER members continue to ignore the importance of equal and equitable funding.

Research has shown that when children are provided with schools that are funded equally and equitably, they do well. Research has also shown that when class sizes are small, and children are taught by qualified teachers, they will thrive educationally, resulting in improved test scores and future success. DFER continues to ignore this research. They continue to ignore that you cannot test your way out of poverty, that CCSS will not cure poverty, and that school choice will not cure poverty. The result of this ignorance will have a lasting impact on our children, and specifically our children who live in poverty.

DFER Believes in School Choice

To give parents the illusion that they have a voice in the educational decision making for their children, DFER relies heavily on the narrative of school choice. Different states have different programs or a combination of different programs in place that all fall under the category of school choice. The proliferation of these different programs is due to the “word manipulation” that DFER members use to pass legislation that allows their agenda to flourish. School choice can be identified as vouchers, education savings accounts, tax-credit scholarships, or even as individual tax credits or deductions. The offering of school choice paves the way for families to enroll students in charter schools. But, the name chosen for the particular program does not matter; the end goal is all the same. Financially, this is another way that our public school system is being starved. Educational dollars remain with each student, so where the student attends school is where the money goes as well.

Stemming from the narrative that public schools are failing, school choice has become a way to sell a quick solution to parents and communities. Charter schools, with the original intent, to allow for educational innovation to occur under a less restrictive environment, freed from regulations and oversight, have been compromised into an alternative education system that funnels public funds to private interests. With the recent induction of Shavar Jeffries into the ranks of DFER, the push for the charter school agenda has been renewed. Jeffries has argued that increasing school choice is necessary for closing the income gap (David, 2016).

With the backing of corporate money, the marketing plan for school choice and charter schools rivals those of large corporations, with DFER doing their share of promotion (Doctrow, 2014). But parents and communities should take a close look at the results of school choice in different locations. In 2009, researchers reported that voucher programs have led to “increased stratification across public and private schools.” In *The impact of school choice and public policy on segregation: Evidence from Chile*, Gregory

Elacqua found “that Chile’s unrestricted flat per-pupil voucher program has led to increased stratification across public and private schools. What has been overlooked, however, is segregation between schools within a sector and variation within private voucher for-profit and non-profit (religious and secular) school sectors.” Elacqua further noted “that public schools are more likely to serve disadvantaged – low-income and indigenous – students than private voucher schools. I also find that the typical public school is more internally diverse with regard to ethnicity and socioeconomic status than the typical private voucher school.” Finally, Elacqua notes, “despite having a mission to serve the needy, Catholic voucher schools enroll, on average, fewer disadvantaged students (vulnerable and indigenous) than public and other private voucher school types” (Elacqua, 2009).

As we have seen in the United States, school choice is not a choice when parents have to make decisions to send their child out of their neighborhood to a school far from their home. An example of the impact of “choice” on children is the story of one child in New Orleans. A student who attended the all-charter district in New Orleans shared his story at a conference held at Texas Christian University. He spoke of rarely seeing his mother when he was growing up because he had to catch a city bus at 6 a.m. to get to school, which was over 20 miles from his home. He played sports after school so did not arrive home until 8 p.m. He saw his mother for 30 minutes a day, as she went to bed at 8:30 to get up for her job early in the morning. In the end, this young man said that school choice was not a choice for him as he was not accepted at the school that was just 2 miles from his home. Public schools take in, and keep, all children, unlike charter schools. In a debate with Dan Senor on the Bill Maher Show, D.L. Hughley said of school choice: “Why do I have to leave my neighborhood to go to school? What is it about my neighborhood that is so bad that I have to leave it to attend school?”

A study on school choice in New Zealand shows that “choice” is not the route to travel if we want to make equitable decisions about education. Helen Ladd and Edward Fiske highlighted in *Does Competition Improve Teaching and Learning? Evidence from New Zealand* “that New Zealand’s introduction of full parental choice in 1992 increased competitive pressures more for some schools than for others. With careful attention to various potential threats to validity, we conclude that competition—as perceived by teachers—generated negative effects on the quality of student learning and other aspects of schooling in New Zealand’s elementary schools” (Ladd & Fiske, 2003). Hansen and Gustafsson also found in Sweden that school choice leads to segregation. Hansen and Gustafsson concluded “that school segregation with respect to migration background and educational achievement had increased over time, while social segregation remained rather constant. The degree of school segregation varied largely

across different municipality types, and it was concluded that school choice was a determinant of school segregation” (Hansen & Gustafsson, 2015). Finally, Dennis Epple and Richard E. Romano found in *Competition between Private and Public Schools, Vouchers, and Peer-Group Effects* “that tuition vouchers increase the relative size of the private sector and the extent of student sorting, and benefit high-ability students relative to low-ability students” (Epple & Romano, 1998).

DFER’s education policies would have us believe that the voucher system gives all children choice, when in fact, it provides choice to a few children. Like their Republican counterparts, DFER continues to support a system that hyper-segregates the school population, rolls back advances made possible by *Brown V. Board of Education*, and destabilizes households when children must leave their neighborhood to attend schools in areas they are not familiar with. Also, the voucher system in most states depletes money from traditional public schools that serve, and keep, all children.

DFER Education Policy Fosters an Anti-Union Platform

Democrats for Education Reform has not come out and directly stated that they would like to see a reduction in the effectiveness of teachers unions to advocate for what they feel is in the best interest of the students. All of the above agenda items on the DFER platform are known to lead towards a reduction in the strength of teacher unions. Their push for school choice leads families to schools that are not unionized, support merit pay, and ignore the benefits that experienced teachers bring to the classroom by denying seniority rights.

As advocates for students, and the last line of defense for children, teachers unions have developed platforms or position statements against DFER’s policies.

In *Do Teacher Unions Hinder Educational Performance? Lessons Learned from State SAT and ACT Scores* it was found that “states with greater percentages of teachers in unions reported higher test performance” on the SAT and ACT (Steelman, Powell, and Carinin, 2000). Burroughs noted in *Arguments and Evidence: The Debate over Collective Bargaining’s Role in Public Education* that Grimes and Register (1981) found SAT scores for African-Americans were higher in union schools. In 1990, Grimes and Register also found that students in unionized schools scored higher on measures of economic literacy (Burroughs, 2008).

Outside of school walls, unions have been good for American society. Noted for building and sustaining the middle class, of which teachers are often members, unions

not only sustain a living wage for workers but also have leveled, somewhat, the playing field for minorities and women. Mishel summarized in *The State of Working America, 12th Edition* that “unionized workers have a higher wage premium, are more likely to be covered for health insurance, and have a pension to sustain them in their later years. With the decline of unions (from 1973-2011 it declined 13.6 percent) we have seen wage inequality has continued to grow between those at the top and those in the middle.” Mishel further warns, “together with other laissez-faire policies such as globalization, deregulation, and lower labor standards such as a weaker minimum wage; deunionization has strengthened the hands of employers and undercut the ability of low- and middle-wage workers to have good jobs and economic security. If we want the fruits of economic growth to benefit the vast majority, we will have to adopt a different set of guideposts for setting economic policy, as the ones in place over the last several decades have served those with the most income, wealth, and political power. Given unions’ important role in setting standards for both union and nonunion workers, we must ensure that every worker has access to collective bargaining” (Mishel, 2012).

Conclusion

The Democrats for Education Reform have initiated a shameless war on public education, even as they claim to support children, teachers, and schools. Essentially, the basic reason DFER was formed was to undermine the strengths of the public school system and the strength of unions in public education. As Tilson noted, the mission of DFER was, “to break the teacher unions’ stranglehold over the Democratic Party, NOT to create equitable schools for our children” (Miller, 2016). Public education is the bedrock of democracy. It is the one public sector institution that can level the playing field for black and brown children in America. It is the one institution that can be the center of communities, both in service of education and a wide range of other societal needs. What DFER has adopted, as seen in this meta-analysis, is a course of destruction for public education. The policies DFER lays out for education (i.e., school choice, support for the Common Core, a “failing schools” narrative, and the overall decline of public education) are all smoke and mirrors for an agenda that seeks to privatize public education in order to generate massive amounts of profit for their wealthy founders and investors. This deceptive campaign has most Americans duped into believing their disingenuous rhetoric about public education. We believe that this analysis of the research around DFER’s agenda debunks much of what the organization supports, and will begin a real conversation about the strengthening of public education for all of America’s children.

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