



The Struggle for Control of Public Education

MARKET IDEOLOGY

VS.

DEMOCRATIC VALUES

MICHAEL ENGEL

The Struggle for Control of Public Education

Market Ideology vs.
Democratic Values



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Preface

This book is a product of theory and practice. The theory part comes from my personal and professional concern with the politics of education. The practice part comes from my participation in community and campus organizing, union activism, and, perhaps most important, service as a school board member in the small town of Easthampton, Massachusetts.

As a student at the City College of New York in the 1960s, I was well aware of its almost unique tradition as a tuition-free public institution. And as an instructor in the City University system during the following decade, I learned how vulnerable that tradition could be if powerful economic and political interests were determined to destroy it. The state college system in Massachusetts, where I have taught for over twenty years, has always been the educational stepchild among the state's prestigious private institutions, which possess overwhelming political influence. And the assault on public elementary and secondary education has been a major feature of national politics over the same period. A concern with protecting public education thus became a personal matter, which I made my specialty as a political scientist.

But the real education came when, after holding other elective offices, I won a seat on my local school committee (the New England term for school board). What immediately struck me was the recurrence of certain themes that seemed to receive unqualified acceptance from everyone involved with the school system: cooperation with the business community, the prime importance of computer technology, corporate models of school governance, an emphasis on collaboration among various "stakeholders" in the system, the economic rationality of school choice, and rigid state standards and assessments in the name of reform. With the exception of choice, these concerns were unfamiliar to me. As a student of the politics of education, I knew a great deal about finance, racial and ethnic issues, and conflicts over curriculum, but the matters

central to the school committee's focus were new to me. The more familiar issues did come up, but the others set the tone for most of the board's work. It became clear to me that these themes were not just local idiosyncrasies but also reflections of national trends backed by a strong consensus in the educational system. I came to witness the power of a set of ideas in directing a highly complex and decentralized system along a single path. In other words, the issues of concern established the framework for the daily operations of a small-town New England school system, run by a board of average citizens who never questioned it and who brought it into line with the actions of thousands of other boards just like it. After further theoretical inquiries, it became apparent that the common bond behind these seemingly disparate trends was the ideology of market economics. The dominant position of this ideology explained both the unquestioning acceptance that these trends were given and the somewhat puzzled responses that I received when I questioned them.

What also became clear was that despite the sincere concern for students held by almost everyone connected with the school system, the market-oriented policies we were pursuing were motivated by anything but that concern. In addition, I became aware of the difficulties involved in making that contradiction apparent to my colleagues, particularly as an individual member working alone.

Although this book started to take shape before my tenure on the board, it was that experience that made me understand the real issues of the politics of U.S. education at the end of the twentieth century. The purpose of this work, therefore, is to call attention to those issues, which are often obscured by more well-publicized controversies, and to offer a point of view about how they are tied to one another. In the words of a well-known nineteenth-century social and economic analyst, however, the point must be not only to interpret the world but to change it. Thus, the purpose of this text is also to demonstrate the pedagogical and political possibilities for a well-established alternative to the market model—democratic public education. I hope that those who read this book will find a way to use this understanding to fight for a school system that really cares enough about members of the younger generation to give them the ability to shape their own future, collectively and democratically, whether we approve of their direction or not.

Acknowledgments

Most books of this kind involve a network of scholars and activists who assist the author with advice and criticism and who are given credit for their efforts. It is probably to the detriment of this particular work that such a network did not exist in this case. No one writes a book alone, however. I therefore extend my appreciation to numerous academic colleagues, community and union activists, and education professionals from whom I have learned over the years. My involvement during the 1970s with the United Community Centers in Brooklyn, New York, deepened my concern with and understanding of the politics of education. Discussions with colleagues at Westfield State College; involvement with fellow members of our faculty union; exchanges with scholars at professional conferences; debates arising during my tenure on the school committee in Easthampton, Massachusetts; anonymous reviews from those who read the first drafts—all of these and more are reflected in this book. Above all, the experience of teaching in public colleges has given me an appreciation of the value and importance of public education and some insight into its complexities. My special thanks go to Michael Ames of Temple University Press and to the production staff at P. M. Gordon Associates. It has been a pleasure to work with them.

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1 Introduction

The most creative, challenging, and inspiring visions of what U.S. public education could be have always been rooted in a democratic value system. Their optimism about human and social development has been linked to optimism about the benefits and potentialities of democracy. Thomas Jefferson saw public education as the means of producing a citizenry capable of defending its right to govern and using that right constructively. Horace Mann sought to build a public education system that would strengthen a democratic value consensus as a basis for social progress. And John Dewey envisioned the public schools as potential microcosms of a democratic society.

Mass movements have advanced similar goals. The Workingmen's parties of the 1820s and 1830s fought for public education as a means of promoting political equality. A century later, progressive educators attempted to put Dewey's ideas into practice. And in the 1960s, women, racial minorities, and other excluded or marginalized social groups successfully organized to extend equal educational opportunity. Of course, they all encountered opposition, and the resulting political struggles shaped the educational system as we know it today: a peculiar amalgam of contradictory ideological and pedagogical directions.

It was the democratic impulse, however, that provided the forward motion. David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995, 10–11) criticize what they call “pie-in-the-sky utopianism” of “extravagant claims for innovations that flickered and failed” but praise “a different kind of utopianism—a vision of a just democracy—that has marked the best discourse about educational purposes over the past century. That discourse promoted the idea that the schools could enable citizens to take an active and positive role in shaping their society. In this way, the people were to be ends, not means; subjects, not objects; and creators, not machines. They were to be val-

ued in and of themselves, not for what they could do to suit the purposes of others. They were to own U.S. social and political institutions, which they would control for their own benefit rather than having the institutions own and control them. And the purpose of the public education system was to help make all this possible.

Today's educational visionaries express the same sentiments. Maxine Greene chooses a philosophy of education based on "utopian thinking . . . that refuses mere compliance, that looks down roads not yet taken to the shapes of a more fulfilling social order, to more vibrant ways of being in the world" (1995, 5). Eleanor Duckworth calls for schooling that helps children develop their own "wonderful ideas," so that "they will someday happen upon wonderful ideas that no one else has happened on before" (1987, 2). Deborah Meier advances a "vision of education . . . [in which] all children could and should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people's ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on this most complex world" (1995, 4). Neil Postman (1995) sees the "false gods" of consumerism, economic utility, technology, and separatism standing in the way of an educational system that would enable students to see themselves as, among other things, "world makers." The editors of *Rethinking Schools* advocate "creating classrooms for equity and social justice" through educational practices that are grounded in students' lives, anti-racist, participatory, experiential, activist, and "hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary" (1994, 4–5).

These ideas are all expressions of a thoroughly democratic perspective. Indeed, Meier connects her commitment to public education to "her passion for democracy and [her] fears for its future" (1995, 5). A pedagogy that rewards openness, creativity, social awareness, and idealism can flourish only when people are able to take control of their own lives by controlling the direction of their society, including the schools. If social and educational purposes are dictated by forces beyond popular control, the avenues of reinvention and growth are closed off.

This is a particularly critical matter for young people. If they learn that they have no voice, that their life decisions will be made by others, and that intellectual risks are heavily sanctioned, they will become, at best, compliant and complacent cogs in an eco-

nomic machine or, at worst, potential recruits for antidemocratic social movements. Even if they rebel, that rebellion will take highly individualistic, idiosyncratic, and perhaps violent forms that produce no constructive results, as is the case at the turn of the twenty-first century. The visions advanced by democratic educators and progressive social movements over the past two hundred years have offered the promise of encouraging and energizing young people to take control of their world and make it a better place. We cannot afford to let those visions dim.

In that light, it is nothing short of disastrous that more than ever before, one antidemocratic system of ideas—market ideology—almost exclusively defines the terms of educational politics and charts the path of education reform. Policy alternatives falling outside its boundaries have been increasingly marginalized since the 1950s, when the progressive education movement collapsed and the politics of education began following a conservative course. For all their positive accomplishments, the radical educational movements of the 1960s did not effectively challenge or alter that course—in fact, their individualistic and libertarian orientation reinforced it. As a result, current-day discussions about the future of education are conducted almost entirely in the language of the free market: individual achievement, competition, choice, economic growth, and national security—with only occasional lip service being given to egalitarian and democratic goals. The educational visionaries referred to at the beginning of this chapter are widely read and respected, but their prescriptions are generally ignored. This state of affairs is in sharp contrast to the intense conflicts that customarily raged in the past over the ideas of those who sought to build a system of common schools that would create a democratic citizenry and a more humane and egalitarian society.

In fact, school privatization—the ultimate goal of market ideologues—is poised for a great leap forward. Despite the well-publicized failures of certain education management organizations (EMOs), entrepreneurs are still optimistic about the possibilities of for-profit public education. Educational Alternatives, Inc. (EAI), made the mistake of trying to manage entire school districts—Hartford, Connecticut, and Baltimore, Maryland. According to one analyst, “The new plan . . . is to do business with individual public

schools and private schools. That plan may be paying off In November [1996] EAI struck a deal to manage a French international school in Boston. And in January [1997] EAI showed its ability to rebound from its setbacks when it secured a multi-million dollar contract to run 12 charter schools in Arizona” (Bushweller 1997, 21).

This kind of rebound is possible because EMOs can rely on sources of funding unavailable to public schools: venture capitalists and conservative think tanks. Among the former is EduVentures, an investment banking service for educational entrepreneurs, which publishes the monthly newsletter *Education Industry Report*. According to the January 31, 1996, edition of the *New York Times*, the chief executive officer (CEO) for EduVentures, Michael Sandler, described educational investment opportunities in highly optimistic terms: “When you look at the raw numbers, this is a very big industry with an enormous potential for growth. Education has reached the point where the status quo is no longer acceptable.” That same year, both Lehman Brothers and Smith-Barney held sizable conferences to provide information for investors in privately managed public education (Bushweller 1997, 19).

The Pioneer Institute, located in Boston, Massachusetts, has been a major promoter of charter schools, the most suitable vehicle for privatization. “In 1995, Pioneer raised more than \$500,000 for charter schools Pioneer also distributes a how-to manual, *The Massachusetts Charter School Handbook*, and sponsors seminars bringing together entrepreneurs selling curriculum packages, management systems, and assessment and evaluation programs” (Vine 1997, 14). Pioneer has played a major role in creating Advantage Schools, Inc., which was running seventeen charter schools in 1998, using \$5 million in seed money from investors. Advantage projected revenues of \$42 million by the 1999–2000 fiscal year and the likelihood of a profit. Michael Milken, upon his release after almost two years in federal prison for securities fraud, invested \$500 million to establish Knowledge Universe. Three years later, Milken’s company was earning annual revenues of \$1.2 billion. Among other holdings, it owned Children’s Discovery Center, “the nation’s sixth-largest preschool company, with 25,000 toddlers in nearly 300 locations across the United States” (Baker 1999). Milken

also had a stake in Nobel Education Dynamics, which runs 139 schools in thirteen states. As Russ Baker describes it, "Companies like Milken's are not just competitors with public schools; they are poised to supplement the traditional classroom, viewing public and nonprofit educational institutions—as well as for-profit forms—as both potential customers and avenues to a vast consumer base" (1999, 12). With the number of charter schools reaching one thousand in 1999, and with President Bill Clinton's blessings for the creation of at least two thousand more, school privatization appears to have reached the takeoff stage and may well be headed for a bright future.

Effective political organizing by conservative forces in all areas of social life, including education, has brought us to this point. In particular, they have been able to control the agenda of education reform since about 1960, even though liberals have shared responsibility for its implementation. That control is already continuing into the twenty-first century. This success, however, is due, at least in part, to ideological confusion among many of those who might chart a different path. To a considerable extent, they have accepted the language and criteria of market ideology themselves or, even worse, rejected the entire concept of ideological frameworks as fraudulent or obsolete in a postmodern era. Therefore, by default, conflicts over the direction of the public schools are played out within the political rules of the game defined by market ideology.

To some observers, this may constitute a realistic recognition of the schools as an "imperfect panacea" with a limited capability for changing society (Perkinson, 1968). If we abandon utopian goals, it is claimed, we can focus on more rational and achievable objectives for the school system. Mainstream policy analysts in particular argue that consensus is healthier than constant conflict and that a stable educational system that develops out of negotiation, bargaining, and compromise among a plurality of interests is far more beneficial for the nation. With the addition of what is assumed by these analysts to be a conservative shift in U.S. political values, it stands to reason that educational policy would follow suit.

This argument is examined and challenged in Chapter 2, but even if we assume that limited goals are all we can achieve, the narrow ideological terrain of contemporary educational debate is not

a normal or healthy phenomenon. Three hundred years of conflict over educational ideas and values shows that there is no logical basis for assuming that market ideology is the only possible framework for the consideration of policy alternatives for the schools. Most important, however, is the fact that market ideology's virtually unchallenged dominance threatens the very existence of public education as a social institution, because its logic ultimately eliminates any justification for collective and democratic control of the schools. Market ideology and democratic values in education are mutually exclusive. This may be true on a broader social level as well; Robert Kuttner claims that "the celebration of the market has become an insidious form of contempt for political democracy" (1997, 337).

Confirmation of this claim can be found in the arguments of some of the most prominent supporters of market ideology in education. John Chubb and Terry Moe explicitly reject democracy as a means of organizing schools. They call for a school choice system based on the "guiding principle" that "public authority must be put to use in creating a system that is almost entirely beyond the reach of public authority" (1990, 218) and propose the creation of what is essentially a network of publicly funded state-chartered private schools. They argue that student academic achievement—their sole criterion for evaluating public education—depends on the institutional environment of the schools. Democratic control, given the nature of public authority, "is essentially coercive" (28) and inevitably leads to bureaucracy. The combined effect of both is destructive of academic achievement. In their words, "choice is a panacea" that can liberate the schools (217). Citing the observation of Ludwig von Mises that the votes of the losing minority are wasted in a majority-rule system, Joseph L. Bast and Herbert J. Walberg (1996, 154–155) support this point of view and assert that parents are no match for organized interest groups of teachers and administrators. They argue that "privatization rescues parents from this uneven competition by moving the consumer-producer relationship outside the political arena." The free market "is far more effective than the clumsy once-a-year voting for or against elected officials who may or may not represent our specific views or do what they promise once elected." Democracy in the school

system is thus seen as a destructive force vastly inferior to the impersonal operations of the market. Although it has been fashionable, since the downfall of communism, to assert that a market economy and democracy are synonymous, advocates of market models for education make no such claim.

Democratic values are a necessary, even if not sufficient, condition for defending the existence of a system of public education. Only from a democratic perspective can one claim that the schools have an impact on and responsibility to the whole society and that as a result they are a matter of collective community concern and legitimate objects of democratic decision making. From Jefferson to Mann to Dewey, and especially during the heyday of progressive education, such ideas were at the center of educational politics. In their absence, there is no longer any convincing rationale to keep the schools public and social in terms of their governance, finance, and pedagogy. The battleground over their future is thus yielded to those who argue that the market can and should make such determinations. This ultimately supports a system of privatized schools in an educational free market, linked to a curricular agenda defined by the needs of a capitalist economy and the national-security state associated with it.

In short, we cannot defend public education, mobilize a constituency behind it, or achieve the visions of democratic educators without a clear and convincing democratic ideological framework that provides a rationale for maintaining a socially owned, controlled, and financed school system. If the market prevails as a model for organizing U.S. education, the possibilities for strengthening a democratic society and developing a democratic citizenry are ended.

Arguments of this kind are, to say the least, not widely accepted among policy analysts, because most discount the significance of ideas and values as formative influences on public policy. But ideologies—comprehensive systems of political ideas and values—serve as the context of political struggle. They affect the political behavior of their adherents, intensify and give form to political conflict, and constitute a powerful force in shaping public policy. Of course, ideologies do not by themselves determine our political choices. But most of us frame our political choices in terms of some

kind of value system, however clear or consistent it may be, and that system tends to have a life of its own. Ideology may indeed be frequently used as a facade to mask “real” interests, but it is reasonable to claim that the two coincide more often than not or at least that we try to make them do so. For better or worse, millions of people have sacrificed their property, security, and lives for political ideologies; not many have done so in the name of economic rationality or incremental change.

Educational historian David B. Tyack argues that ideology is important in understanding educational change. He notes that even at the beginning, public schools “were remarkably similar in institutional character and . . . taught similar lessons.” Tyack explains this in terms of “the invisible hand of ideology”: “The crusaders who spread public education generally shared a set of beliefs: that public education’s purpose was to train upright citizens by inculcating a common denominator of nonsectarian morality and non-partisan civic instruction, and that the common school should be free, open to all children, and public in support and control” (1993, 7–8). Noting the “persistent importance of ideology in school reform,” he complains that

the belief systems underlying much of current American educational reform seem impoverished and incomplete in comparison with earlier ideologies . . . [They] have moved away from the tradition of a broad-based conception of democratic citizenship, revealed in action. They substitute the aim of economic competitiveness, to be certified by higher test scores. Such a narrowing of purpose omits much that is of value from the discussion of educational policy and constricts the historical vision of the common school. (25–26)

Ideology is nonetheless often overlooked or at best misapplied by mainstream social scientists as a factor in politics. This is due in part to the dominance of quantitative methodologies in political science, which leads to the trivialization of the concept into conveniently measurable but irrelevant labels. And ideology fits rather uncomfortably into structural-functional social theories, which are based on assumptions of value consensus. The study of the politics of education also generally ignores ideology. Most contemporary analysts appear to assume that policy is made on the basis of a commonly accepted definition of education and on the basis of agree-

ment on the criteria we use to evaluate it and that the real battles are over implementation of specific reforms. This seems inconsistent with the complex and contentious history of U.S. educational politics, which has been rife with fundamental disagreements over just such issues since colonial times. Even if those struggles appear to have abated and a consensus seems to exist among policymakers, it deserves some analysis and explanation in relation to that history. Yet today there is not much conscious awareness or discussion of the role of ideology in the politics of education.

Market ideology has triumphed over democratic values not because of its superiority as a theory of society but in part because in a capitalist system it has an inherent advantage. Ironically, market ideology does not really have to compete fairly in a free market of ideas. It therefore dominates economic and political thinking by default in the absence of any serious challenges; in U.S. politics, this is reflected in the rightward drift of both major parties and the decline of liberalism as a political movement. In the area of education, the progressive movement was the last of those challenges. Therefore, for those who wish to prevent the privatization of schools and the corporate control of their direction and purpose, and in particular for those who further wish to reconstruct the system along more democratic lines, it is critical to reject market ideology totally and explicitly as a basis for education reform. In short, the artificial ideological consensus that began in the mid-1900s must be disrupted if there is to be a successful movement for democratic educational change. The first step in that struggle is on the level of ideas, and, fortunately, the last years of the twentieth century brought some promising efforts in that direction. But often, because a form of historical and philosophical amnesia has set in, such efforts end up reinventing the wheel, especially in relation to the more radically democratic aspects of the U.S. tradition. They are also often expressed at a level of theoretical abstraction that lacks a comprehensive elaboration and grounding in the real world of educational politics; this is especially true of postmodernist thinking. This book therefore sets out to further those efforts by dealing with these problems.

Conflicts over educational policy are, of course, played out in the real world of political struggle, not just on the level of ideas.

The specific form those policies take is therefore the outcome of many variables: the nature of the particular issue, the relative strength of contending interest groups, the climate of public opinion, and the response of government officials, among other factors. U.S. public schools, although in many ways strikingly similar in organization and pedagogical style, thus also embody diverse and even contradictory educational principles as well. The curriculum that resulted from years of political conflict is a case in point, says Herbert M. Kliebard: "It serves to liberate the human spirit and also to confine it; it is attuned to the well-being of children and youth and also contributes to their disaffection and alienation from the mainstream of social life; and it represents a vehicle for social and political reform as well as a force for perpetuating existing class structures and for the reproduction of social inequality" (1987, 270).

This kind of pluralism in educational politics may be coming to an end. It thrives only in an environment of competing ideas and values. If the school system is truly to reflect a legitimate community consensus on educational goals and purposes, there needs to be an extensive menu of alternatives from which to choose. If the debate over the future of the schools is conducted entirely within the limits of one theoretical or ideological framework, the quality of that debate degenerates. It loses sight of ends and discusses only means. Educational policy may still be the outcome of negotiation, bargaining, and compromise, but the context and terms of those deliberations unacceptably limit the options. David Plank and William L. Boyd describe this as an "antipolitics" of education, "in which disagreements about educational policy and practice are increasingly likely to be addressed in conflict over the institutions of educational governance rather than in open debate on the merits of alternative goals and strategies" (1994, 264). If only one point of view on the goals and purposes of education predominates, democratic political decision making ends.

The progressive education movement, for all its flaws and inconsistencies, once provided the menu of alternatives. Its demise created an intellectual and political vacuum that has not been filled since. The final chapter of Lawrence Cremin's *The Transformation of the School* chronicles the rapid decline of the progressive educa-