

Former lobbyist details how privatizers are trying to end public education ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A few years ago I ran a piece by Joanne Barkan about the long history of the movement to privatize public education. It began:

When champions of market-based reform in the United States look at public education, they see two separate activities — government funding education and government running schools. The first is okay with them; the second is not. Reformers want to replace their *bête noire* — what they call the “monopoly of government-run schools” — with freedom of choice in a competitive market dominated by privately run schools that get government subsidies.

Today, that privatization movement is alive and pushing ahead, with Republican legislators in 16 states actively pushing bills to create or expand school vouchers and/or charter schools that are part of that movement.

This post — a continuation of sorts of the Barkan article — is a discussion with a man named Charles Siler, who was once a lobbyist for school privatizers but who came to oppose the very thing he was working toward. Siler worked for two privatization organizations, including the Goldwater Institute in Arizona, where his job was to persuade legislators to pass laws that privatize public services, especially K-12 schooling.

In March, Siler had a conversation with education historian and activist Diane Ravitch as well as with podcaster Jennifer Berkshire, in which he provided insight into the playbook used by “school choice” proponents, the belief system that drives them and their long-term objective. He makes it very clear: Their ultimate goal is to dismantle K-12 public schools.

Carol Burris, a former prizewinning principal and executive director of the nonprofit advocacy group the Network for Public Education, did a Q&A with Siler on the same issues. Here’s the interview Burris did with Siler:

BURRIS: Charles, can you tell me about yourself — specifically, for whom did you work as a lobbyist for privatizing public services, and why did you leave that work?

SILER: I am Charles Siler, former Army public affairs and graduate of George Mason University with an economics degree. I lobbied and did public relations for the Goldwater Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, and the Foundation for Government Accountability in Naples, Florida. Both organizations are part of the State Policy Network, a collection of libertarian/conservative policy organizations around the country. While there, I promoted medical freedom legislation, programs to increase limitations on public assistance programs and school privatization programs.

I eventually left as I realized I wasn't a great fit for that work. The outcomes weren't aligning with my values. I grew up truly believing the best way we could help the most people was to get the government out of their lives. But if you take a look at the actual impacts of libertarian policies when they're implemented, it becomes apparent, they aren't helping people, and in fact, they make people worse off. I couldn't continue to do the work I had done. Now I work to educate people about the problematic programs I had helped promote and how we can build something better.

BURRIS: Let's get straight to the point. It is becoming more obvious that all of the voucher and charter expansion legislation we see this year is part of a larger mission being pushed by libertarian Republicans. First, am I right? And second, what is the ultimate goal?

SILER: There's virtually no other initiative in the education space that's a bigger priority for the right today than creating and expanding unaccountable, unrestricted, universal voucher programs. The easiest way to recognize this reality is to look at the incredible number of school voucher bills being pushed across state legislatures just this year.

They aren't doing it because their constituents are demanding these programs. Voters continually reject voucher programs, and in any state where a public response is permitted, the wave of public opposition to these programs dwarfs the AstroTurfed support for them. They also fervently refuse to include any kind of measures to mitigate fraud, waste, abuse and lack of accountability in these voucher programs despite having evidence from established programs. But simply setting up voucher programs isn't their ultimate goal; it's just the current next step towards their ultimate goal.

Their ideal is a world with as minimal public infrastructure and investment as possible. They want the weakest and leanest government possible in order to protect the interests of a few wealthy individuals and families who want to protect their extraction of wealth from the rest of us. They see private wealth accumulation as a virtue signal because a person can only become wealthy by creating something of exceptional value for the public. In their world view, the more money someone has, the more moral life they've lived, and any attempt to take that money through taxation or other means is a moral issue.

That's why they work so diligently to undermine public infrastructure, whether that's public schools, public transportation, military spending, and even the carceral system.

They also work to undermine collective action in the form of unions, voting blocs, protests and more. To them, it's equally immoral for a union to demand higher wages of a business owner as it is for voters to impose a higher minimum wage on business owners. The same people pushing for school privatization are the same ones pushing for voter suppression, and that's why. They fear the power of people.

BURRIS: In many states, we see a multiplicity of voucher programs — all functioning differently and all with different names. Why?

SILER: The hodgepodge of voucher and privatization programs is a result of their unpopularity. Since they are pushing an unpopular agenda across the country, each state presents different opportunities and challenges for school privatizers.

The programs have to have different names to create a sort of moving target. When advocating for voucher programs, I never used the term "voucher" because we knew it was already tainted and politically unpopular. That's why we called them Education Savings Accounts, or Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts, and so on. We knew that the public didn't support our efforts, but there's also a sincere belief that the public doesn't truly understand what is best for them, so we have to trick them into buying what we're selling. So much of our outreach was obfuscation. I spent many phone calls with reporters trying to explain to them why our program wasn't a voucher program and shouldn't be labeled as such.

At the end of the day, the multiplicity you see is a direct result of the unpopularity of vouchers, but make no mistake, they all have the same purpose: To undo public education — not only the institution but also the public funding of schools.

BURRIS: We are now seeing charter expansion legislation paired with voucher legislation. How do charter schools fit into the agenda?

SILER: Charter schools are part of the incremental march towards full privatization. Sometimes charter schools are part of the hook for large donors. A number of wealthy privatization financiers have become part of the movement by funding large grants and other programs for charter schools.

Also, charter schools can be set up in a number of different ways depending on the local political climate, all while starting the shift of public funds into private investments. Charter schools also help garner the support of White voters as charters often find creative ways to discriminate against students of color, increasing segregation. Charters create a number of loopholes in the public education space, from financial and academic accountability to legal protections for marginalized students, which begin to normalize those problems for the general public. In many ways, charter schools are the gateway to total public school dismantling.

BURRIS: What were some of the tricks of the trade, so to speak. Were there certain individuals you searched out to carry the message?

SILER: We would seek out people with sympathetic stories, families or individuals with sincere struggles. The goal was to find people with whom the general public could empathize.

When Florida's voucher program faced a lawsuit by the teachers union there in 2014, I flew to meet with a handful of families who had children with disabilities to create a video series promoting the value of the voucher program. I met with a single mom whose daughter had Down syndrome and needed highly individualized care and therapy. I met with a home-school mom who taught her five kids, but one had severe autism, and she struggled to meet his needs on her own. I met with other families hoping to enroll their kids in special schools that focused on their kids' specific needs. These people were part of the campaign's public face around the legal defense of the voucher program.

Also, if we could ever find minority families willing to speak up about their struggles and desires for school privatization, we'd work to put their faces in as many places as possible. It's one reason privatization advocates focused so heavily on promoting vouchers within the Navajo community recently in a bid to leverage their tribal identity to expand their state's voucher program. In many ways, there's an emphasis on playing identity politics to subvert actual equity efforts, especially when it comes to privatization.

BURRIS: Why is it that many voucher programs start small — with children with disabilities or with military families?

SILER: It goes back to the unpopularity of these voucher and privatization programs, not just with the public but also with many lawmakers. If possible, privatization advocates would completely dismantle public schools tomorrow, but they don't have the political leverage to achieve that right now, so they have to engage in incrementalism. Just this year, we've seen pushes to pass expansive, universal voucher programs in some states, showing that privatizers will abandon elements of incrementalism when they think they have an opportunity.

So, when they can't pull that off, they choose a population they think will be politically unassailable, like children with disabilities or kids in foster care. The idea is that by presenting a small program focused on a small group of vulnerable students, it will be difficult for pro-public education advocates to be directly critical of the programs. It's a "human shield" strategy so they can get any aspect of the program started as it's almost always politically easier to expand something than it is to establish something new. And that's why these voucher programs never stay focused on their original population. They are continually expanding eligibility to more and more students, sometimes at the expense of the initial group of kids the program was established for.

BURRIS: Who are the major funders of the so-called school choice movement, and why are they hostile to public education?

SILER: I can't speak about specific funders or donors who haven't been identified already in a public way, but some are pretty obvious. Former secretary of education Betsy DeVos has made dismantling public schools part of her life's work, and through the DeVos Family Foundation, she funds privatization efforts across the country. Her work as a financier likely has done and will do more damage to public schools than her entire tenure with the Trump administration.

The heirs of the Walmart fortune, the Walton family, also funds privatization across the country — especially charter schools. The Koch Foundation is probably the most publicly villainized supporters of dismantling public schools, and in many ways, there wouldn't be such a vast network of pro-privatization advocates had it not been for the tireless support of Charles and David Koch. There's also the Bradley Foundation, which contributes to numerous conservative groups and is also a financial driver of school privatization.

But it's not just billionaires. It's also local businesses funding privatization efforts, either through donations made by their owners or investments into state and local chambers of commerce. It's individuals, small donors, too. But they really aren't sufficient to make the entire machine, the industry of school privatization, function. It truly takes the massive investment of the exceptionally wealthy to drive the privatization agenda.

Their hostility to public education is best described as being the nexus of three parts. First, they want to minimize any government spending whatsoever, and public education is one of the largest line items in any state budget. Getting rid of public education spending would massively reduce the tax burden on wealthy individuals at the state level.

Public schools are also incredibly popular, and they don't want the general public to view public institutions as effective or popular. It's why they've driven a false narrative about "failing schools" for decades now, and it's also why they continually attack Social Security, Medicare, public pensions, public transportation and more because they know it's impossible to get people to share their vision for limited government when people have so many positive experiences with government programs. And lastly, it's about diminishing collective power. Taking down public schools also means taking down teachers unions, PTOs, local school boards and all the other ways those of us who aren't exceptionally wealthy come together to push for collective investment in our communities.

Public schools and the communities around them represent the kind of togetherness privatization advocates despise.

BURRIS: I know that one of the principles that school choice advocates believe in is "backpack funding," or "the money follows the child." If that were to happen, what would prevent the money in the backpack to become less and less, with parents required to finance the rest? Is that the plan? Is that ever discussed?

SILER: The idea of "backpack funding" is absurd on its face since public investments are in institutions to educate a community rather than any individual. We don't have money for each student, because we have money for schools. And privatizers rarely tell you what all you leave behind when a family decides to take their "backpack," like federal protections against discrimination, protections for disability services, mandatory reporters and much more.

To your question, though, we can already see that privatizers have no interest in increasing the funds in the "backpack." In Arizona, where voters passed a new tax to increase public education funding, which would, in turn, increase the value of vouchers in the state, that tax is being actively undermined by privatization advocates. They are actively working to continue their divestment of our public education system, even at the expense of funds to voucher families, because these programs are not designed to help anyone. They are simply designed to exacerbate the destruction of public funding for education.

If the privatizers could create their ideal education model, which they are building towards every day, individual families would determine how important their children's educations are to them by funding that education on their own. They would create a model similar to what we have for higher education, where individuals can take out loans to cover the cost of their K-12 education. The premise being that if education for an individual is truly a worthwhile investment, then the individual receiving the education should bear those costs. School privatizers want to empty the public "backpack" entirely and leave individual families to figure out funding for their education expenses.

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BURRIS: For several years now, I have feared that the school choice movement is not about providing families with choices, but part of a bigger vision that seeks to make the education of America's children a service to be paid for by parents, with a poorly funded public option for those who cannot pay. Now former insider Charles Siler confirmed that fear.

This discussion is relevant not only at the state level but also at the federal level. The fiscal year 2022 federal budget, which is in development, is likely to include funds for the Charter Schools Program (CSP), a program whose purpose is to expand charter schools, which are privately operated but publicly funded. The CSP is about charter school expansion — which plays right into the right-wing/Libertarian agenda that former lobbyist Siler was hired to expand.

There may be well-meaning elected officials in Washington and state capitals who think charters and vouchers are about helping

disadvantaged students. And no doubt some families have enjoyed choice. But every bill that passes and every program funded furthers the agenda of the radical libertarian right and Betsy DeVos. They know what their endgame is, and they are rapidly making progress.

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