

So-called school reform serves corporate ends

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While Vision 2015 demonstrates how citizens will gather for common educational purposes, its corporate-dominated agenda undermines common needs. Delaware should take time out before committing \$100 million to convert schools into business academies, Balkanize children based on class, race and gender, divorce education from community needs, and worsen income gaps in this age of unregulated, winner-take-all capitalism.

An alarm went off in my head at the March 20 gubernatorial debate, when moderators John Taylor of the Delaware Public Policy institute and News Journal education editor Alison Kepner asked Democratic candidates Lt. Gov. John Carney and state Treasurer Jack Markell if they would endorse recommendations of the LEAD Committee. Carney and Markell demurred -- but what was the LEAD Committee anyway?

Populated with key Vision 2015 players, the LEAD Committee concocted management's dream list of demands: replace educators' guaranteed retirement with 401(k) plans, multiply the student load of administrators, and slash the wages of blue-collar contractors.

That's not exactly the best way to attract the most capable teachers, principals and construction workers.

The momentum of this corporate-led juggernaut is impressive. Blessed by the Legislature and Gov. Minner, Vision 2015 and its Broad and Rodel foundation architects have corralled politicians, school board members and administrators from across Delaware into its training seminars and retreats.

Corporate backers include AstraZeneca, several banks, Delmarva Power, DuPont and Verizon.

Another screw up

Why, you might ask, shouldn't corporations have a chance to fix what the public sector has allegedly fouled up?

They've had their chance. For example, partly to qualify for a \$1.5 million Broad Foundation urban schools grant, former Christina School District Superintendent Joseph Wise moved district offices to Wilmington. When the district's \$20 million shortfall was exposed, the Broad Foundation was ready with self-serving nostrums. In a February column published in The News Journal, Eli Broad touted his pet cure-all -- charter schools.

While these schools often enjoy dedicated staff and innovative programs, the dirty secret is that teachers in Delaware's charter schools are denied union representation -- a denial of rights that's absolutely unnecessary to innovation.

Insurance giant AIG, the source of Eli Broad's fortune, lost \$5 billion last quarter on the collapse of instruments leveraged on subprime loans.

Ban government from schools, repeal the Glass-Steagall Act that from 1933 to 1999 regulated bankers' high risk-investments, and watch those test scores soar. Maybe not.

Remember that high-stakes testing and the No Child Left Behind law were portrayed as a grass-roots movement, although no one but corporate bean counters and captive politicians wanted it -- not parents, not students, and certainly not educators.

There are non-corporate alternatives. Rethinking Schools Online is a terrific resource by educators dedicated to children and their communities. Paolo Freire said true education doesn't "bank" testable fragments in student brains; it generates community problem solving.

We have been riding a wave of Hobbesian market fundamentalism and brutish competition that has exported jobs, destroyed the dollar, exploded the deficit, foreclosed homes, corrupted Congress, decimated unions, monopolized media, rewarded CEOs, and enabled a non-reality-based foreign policy. Americans have been divided by race, class, religion, politics, language and gender, so that, as Barack Obama characterized it, "opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense."

Busing, charter schools, home schooling, vouchers, high-stakes testing, private schools and gender segregation, for all their attractions, limit community choices to choices that limit community.

The stewardship of public education is hard work, which we must not surrender to private interests at odds with community ends.