The End of "Public" in Public Education

By Thomas Nelson & Bruce A. Jones

To say that there has been a systematic diminishment in the "public" purpose of public education would be a gross understatement. Education is big business and viewed as a largely untapped and unlimited source of taxpayer revenue for private individuals. Literally billions of dollars are realized as for-profit- corporations market themselves to public schools. Schools and those who live and work in them are subject to being earmarked as consumers like at no other time in the history of public education in America. The privatization movement has, in a relatively short period of time, transformed how schools are defined, how they operate, and in whose interest they ultimately serve. The re-enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* in 2001 has helped pave the way for corporate access to federal, state, and local taxes dollars. These tax dollars are routinely directed through the public system into corporate and private coffers, in the forms of the new Educational Management Organization industry, standardized test publication, accompanying textbook publication, and tutoring services, not to mention the widespread use

Thomas Nelson is a professor in the Benerd School of Education at the University of the Pacific, Stockton, California, and editor of Teacher Education Quarterly. *Bruce A. Jones is a professor and director of the David C. Anchin Center at the University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida.*

of outsourcing school services. Unfortunately, this transformation continues unabated and has occurred with minimal transparency and critical analysis.

This frontal assault on the public nature of education has led to the standardization not only of what *students* should know and be able to do, but also of what *teachers* should know and be able to do. Good teaching under *NCLB* has become narrowly defined as a set of technical skills aimed at getting students to achieve with some proficiency on standardized tests, which, of course, are designed, constructed, and published by a select few corporations which have reaped enormous profit from these products. What is being required of those in pubic education schools today is rigid compliance to a highly prescriptive accountability system that has been defined by business and political leaders. Teachers have literally been stripped of any curriculum decision-making authority. Teachers typically understand the complexities inherent in classroom learning environments and create multiple assessments to determine how and to what degree students are learning content material. Corporate influenced standardization practices have reduced the professional nature of teachers' work by requiring adherence to specific curricula and assessment materials. It is increasingly more difficult to embrace one's profession when those in business and political leadership are making the rules. How is the role of teacher preparation institutions changed as a result of increasing emphasis on standardization? And, in what ways is the teacher education profession being impacted by the resulting privatization movement?

One of the essential goals of this special issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* is to bring a comprehensive level of transparency and critical analysis to the activities of the private sector in the public education arena to help inform the teacher education community about the implications of such activity. You will see, as you read through the collection of articles, how private sector interests have designed, shaped, and influenced key federal education legislation, such as *NCLB,* in conjunction with the standards movement and current testing craze. Consistent with for-profit motives, the testing industry is cited as one of the fastest growing and lucrative industries in the nation. You will see how *A Nation at* Risk played a critical role in setting the tone and justification for the need for kids to be rescued from the proclaimed horrors of our public education system. In this regard, the profession has not helped itself because public school systems have never done well serving the academic needs of historically disenfranchised groups, such as African Americans and Latino American kids in low socioeconomic urban settings and poor European American children in rural and metropolitan settings. The failure by educators in K-12 and higher education to lead, take charge, and tackle educational inequities has opened a void for private sector interests to fill. As Jones (in this issue) points out, the fact that we have failed to address these groups appropriately in the classroom and in our school districts has provided some of the ammunition that is used by the private sector to take the "public" out of public education.

The authors in this special issue make it abundantly clear that the private sector

has taken authority and control over policies and practices that govern not only how schools operate, but also what occurs in public school classrooms (both what is learned, and how it is learned) and in fact, has contributed to redefining the nature of the public sphere itself. Corporate influence on educational reform legislation (*NCLB* being the most prominent) has resulted in two major dynamics: one, the devaluation of what it means to be a public education system, and two, the view that schools can and should be viewed as commercial markets for the purpose of expanding corporate profit margins.

To say that there is a crisis in public education would be the understatement of the century. Educators at all levels are dealing with an extremely well-funded ideological—and mostly hidden—agenda aimed at maximizing corporate profit and political capital (i.e., authority, power, and control) while shrinking the public spaces necessary to nurture and sustain a democratic way of life. Without sustained and passionate resistance from educators, parents, and students, it is likely that the private sector will further seek increasingly monopolistic control not only over consumer products and profits, but also over the very ideas and ideals that are deemed "official." One must revisit Michael Apple's curriculum question, "Whose knowledge is of most worth?" And for whose purpose is this official knowledge defined?

What has taken place in our nation's public school classrooms has historically been the subject of tireless scrutiny and business led criticism about the lack of attention paid to preparing students for the purpose of contributing to economic growth. Such influence increased significantly with the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, which raised the issue of the relationship between public schooling and our national security. It also suggested that a national crisis was in the making that only highly prescriptive, rigid, and rigorous reform measures could cure. Consider the language in the first paragraph of this landmark educational reform document:

> History is not kind to idlers. The time is long past when American's destiny was assured simply by an abundance of natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations. The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer. (p. 1)

Certain assumptions are embedded in this introductory paragraph to *A Nation at Risk*. One, that administrators, teachers, and students in schools had become languid, ruefully lazy, and lacking in the motivation and enthusiasm to recognize the nation's vulnerability in a globally competitive economic climate. Two, that the purpose and responsibility of public schools is to provide the workforce necessary to compete in a newly fashioned global economy; the message being that our nation's public schools have failed to prepare their graduates with the knowl-

edge and skills required to participate in this international competitive environment; that to compete in a global economy is the most important and unquestioned goal of America's public schools. Third, and perhaps the most disguised assumption made then (and still being made among most business leaders engaged in school reform) is that economic competitiveness and further commercial exploitation (i.e., profit) is directly related to the harvesting or extracting of natural resources and their subsequent distribution for commercial sale. Business views the natural world as the source of all market commodities.

Bednar (2003) argues that, "Within the dominant paradigm, the overarching purpose of all social institutions, expressed through the actions of individuals, is to support unlimited economic growth . . . young people will necessarily pursue a career that serves the interests of those who direct the growth economy" (p. 143). Hence, the purpose of pubic schooling has been co-opted and defined by those whose profit driven margins are of most consequence. As Orr (1994) states, "... that without significant precautions, education can equip people merely to be more effective vandals of the earth" (p. 5). What is ultimately at stake is the future of our increasingly fragile relationship with the natural world. And one must ask the question, what role should schools play relative to the looming ecological crisis? Perhaps what we need is a change in the worldview that advances competition to a worldview that values and promotes cooperation.

Much in the same way as corporate interests have exploited natural resources they have also exploited a relatively politically passive audience in teachers and students. Schools are viewed as the primary training ground for workers in this war of burgeoning international marketplace competition. Of course the economy in question is fueled by the corporate, political, media generated message that consumption of goods is in the nation's best interest and that the more consumption that occurs, the healthier our economy will be. The core values of this paradigm "focus on maximizing profit and increasing the quantity of things a person owns" rather than the "quality of relations among people and between people and the environment" (Spring, 2004, p. 34). In this scenario, kids are commodities to be treated like factory widgets and tested to determine reliability and their place in the world. The idea of thinking of kids as human beings who need to interface with each other and eventually as adults in high quality relationships is contrary to the factory widget model.

Outside of the world of educators themselves schools are rarely perceived as public institutions whose purpose is to inculcate succeeding generations to both understand community and learn to behave responsibly as citizens in a democratic society. The very survival of public space fundamental to a democratic society is in jeopardy of being subsumed under the guise of the "educational reform" currently so widely disseminated by private interests and insatiable greed. Rather than promoting democracy, the current business-influenced educational reform only serves to strengthen hegemony. The notion of runaway commercialism at the

expense of promoting democratic life is expressed by many of the contributing authors to this special issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly.*

As teachers in schools have come under attack for steering our nation toward the brink of disaster (again refer to *A Nation at Risk*), those who prepare teachers are ultimately seen as responsible for student achievement or lack thereof. The business solution: reform teacher education programs in order that they focus solely on those objectives prescribed by business/corporate/media, those that perceive good teaching as an efficient means of executing narrowly defined knowledge and skills relative to sustaining economic growth.

Teacher educators today are fully engaged in adapting to top-down edicts demanding that they make changes in curriculum and instruction. These top-down edicts have all but eliminated administrators, teachers, parents, teacher educators, and more importantly, students as partners in the collective and public deliberation of what it means to be an educated person. In a real sense public education policies have become less public. What is expected to occur within the confines of public schools is now almost completely determined by business leaders, grandstanding politicians, and the media. These private-based influences have unlimited resources as well as the best lawyers money can buy (see Jones "Table Top Theory," in this issue) to shape obedient and compliant teachers who are charged with delivering a narrow curriculum focused primarily on reading and mathematics skill acquisition through "scientifically based pedagogy" and an overabundance of high stakes testing. Efforts to de-intellectualize teaching through a mandated emphasis on scripted curricula along with a plethora of standardized tests have helped to intensify the teacher attrition problem. As Hinchey and Cadiero-Kaplan (2005) write, "Much evidence suggests that current 'reform' strategies are intentionally driving well-educated professionals from the classroom and that once a teaching shortage has been exacerbated, teaching will be virtually deskilled. At this point, 'teaching' will be provided by alternative 'delivery mechanisms' that make teachers virtually obsolete" (p. 1).

More specifically, the questions raised by authors in this issue are: To what ends does the private sector commit essentially unlimited resources for the sole purpose of harboring and wielding authority, power, and control over public school policies? To what length is the private sector willing to go to in mastering its role in determining the day to day (hour to hour) activities of both students and teachers in public school settings? And again for whose benefit? What are the consequences of runaway private control over public education?

In summary, this special issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* addresses some fundamental questions: Who has (and who should have) the authority, power, and control over what goes on in each and every public school classroom each and every day in this country? What is the relationship between public education and the private sector? What are the implications of private interest domination of public education for teacher education and professional development? And, implied by

all of the above, what should the teacher education community do now and in the future in response to these new realities?

References

Bednar, C. S. (2003). *Transforming the dream: Ecologism and the shaping of an alternative American vision*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Hinchey, P. H., & Cadiero-Kaplan, K. (2005). The future of teacher education and teaching: Another piece of the privatization puzzle. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 3(2).

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk*. Washington, DC: Author.

Orr, D. W. (1994). *Earth in mind*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Spring, J. (2004). *How educational ideologies are shaping global society: Intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, and the decline of the nationstate.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.