

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS
PRESS RELEASE 902
PRIVATISATION OF EDUCATION
UNDER THREAT IN
USA**

There is a lot of talk about ‘back to basics’ from right wing think tanks in both the USA and Australia. But DOGS suggest we do go back to basics if we think we are a democracy.

In a commonwealth we pay taxes for the common weal or the common good. When this comes to schools only public schools are dedicated to the public not the private good. They are public in purpose and outcome; public in access; public in ownership and control; and the only schools that can be publicly accountable.

Therefore they are the only ones that should be publicly funded.

If your objective is to educate the whole population of citizenry – who pay taxes for the common good, then public schools are the only schools that can and will do it.

Private schools are dedicated to the private, individual good or privilege and cannot and never have considered all the children. If a private school fails, the children have nowhere to go – unless there is a public school nearby. All the hype of the neo-liberals of the last 30 years about private being preferable and more efficient than public and the need to ‘reform’ i.e. privatise public education has had a sharp reality check in the last decade – with not only the GFC but now the plague.

These basic facts have been thrown into perspective in Chicago when Charter schools, which are called public but are really private for profit schools, have been de-funded.

For your information we produce a very interesting article by Jeff Bryant in the *Progressive Magazine* of 11 August 2021 entitled: *The End of School Reform* at <https://progressive.org/magazine/the-end-of-school-reform-bryant/>

Jeff Bryant is the lead fellow of The Progressive's Public Schools Advocate project, and a writing fellow and chief correspondent for Our Schools, a project of the Independent Media Institute. He writes:

Whatever leadership imperatives become the new driving force behind the next education policy directives, they are doomed to irrelevance if they ignore the needs and interests of teachers.

It was telling that few people noticed when Chicago's Board of Education [announced](#) in late May that it was closing down its school turnaround program and folding the thirty-one campuses operated by a private management company back into the district.

The once all-pervasive and generously funded policy movement known as education reform has ended—not with a bang, but a whimper.

The turnaround program had been a cornerstone of "[Renaissance 2010](#)," the education reform policy led by former Chicago Public Schools Chief Executive Officer Arne Duncan, who became U.S. Secretary of Education during the Obama Administration. As the news outlet *Catalyst Chicago* [reported](#), Duncan used the core principles of Renaissance 2010 as the basis for "Race to the Top," his signature policy that he [rolled out](#) to the nation.

Race to the Top, a [successor](#) to former President George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" program, included holding schools accountable for higher scores on standardized tests, inserting private management companies into district administration, and ramping up charter schools to compete with public schools.

Another news event affecting Chicago public schools that got very little national attention was the decision by the Illinois state legislature to [rescind mayoral control](#) of Chicago schools and bring back a democratically elected school board. The plan is backed by the state's Democratic governor, J.B. Pritzker (and, predictably, opposed by Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot). For years, prominent Democratic leaders—including New York Governor [Andrew Cuomo](#) and former Chicago mayor and previously Obama White House Chief of Staff [Rahm Emanuel](#)—touted mayoral control and a rejection of school board governance.

A third story from the Chicago education scene was that, in December, Noble Charter Network, the city's largest charter school chain, [disavowed](#) its "no excuses" approach to educating Black and brown students because of the racist implications. Noble's decision added to [other reports](#) of no-excuses charter chains dropping their harsh behavioral control and discipline policies during the past year.

These stories highlight the waning of three "school improvement" approaches: strict accountability with private management, mayoral control, and no-excuses charter schools. Each approach was among the pillars of "education reform" favored by previous presidential administrations and heartily [endorsed](#) by Washington, D.C., policy shops, such as the Center for American Progress.

Taken in unison, the three stories also contribute to the much larger narrative of how the once all-pervasive and generously funded policy movement known as education reform has ended—not with a bang, but a whimper.

Other policy directives of the reform movement that are also being relegated to the dustbin of history include [state takeovers](#) of low-performing schools, evaluating teachers [based on student test scores](#), and [flunking third-graders](#) who score below a certain threshold on reading exams.

Architects and cheerleaders of the reform movement have noticed how their cause has transitioned into a sunset phase. Conor Williams, a fellow at the Century Foundation who has [lifted up](#) the outcomes of education reform in Washington, D.C., [writes](#) for *The 74*, a pro-reform media outlet, that “we’ve arrived at the end of an era in American public education,” calling the ideas propelled by policies like Race to the Top “pretty much toast.”

Writing in *Education Week*, Van Schoales, who as president of the nonprofit A+ Colorado was a prominent driver of reform in that state, [declared](#) the movement “over” and urged his reform-minded colleagues to “work directly with those closest to the problems” and “focus now on listening.”

Anyone taking to heart advice to listen to educators and advocates on the ground had better be ready to hear a cacophony.

However, in school board meetings and other public forums around the country, it’s been the voices of angry parents and political agitators, often [financially backed](#) by rightwing think tanks and advocacy groups, who are the ones being heard.

They have [demanded](#) that schools open for in-person learning during the pandemic, [pushed](#) to lift requirements that students wear masks and practice social distancing, and, most recently, [denounced](#) teachers for supposedly “indoctrinating” children in ideas such as critical race theory that, they argue, shame white people and create divisiveness in society.

Pitched battles over school curriculums and teaching practices—like the one [being waged](#) in Loudoun County, Virginia, where a recent school board meeting had to be shut down, a raucous audience member was arrested, and school board members now face a recall—have overtaken more sober and reasoned policy discussions about how to improve students’ academic outcomes and respond to their social-emotional needs.

These conflicts, as Adam Sanchez reports in this issue of *The Progressive*, have led to a raft of new bills—many now enshrined as state laws—aiming to force teachers to teach a “mythological version of U.S. history” that omits shameful facts about racism and other forms of discrimination.

“The expansive language of these bills,” warns Sanchez, a high school history teacher in Philadelphia, “will undoubtedly have a chilling effect on the classroom” and force teachers to “hide the truth of racism—past and present—in the United States.”

Sarah Lahm, in her companion article, reveals much of what and who is behind these efforts to muzzle teachers from talking about the truth in their lessons. They are, she says, “rightwing provocateurs” prompted by former President Donald Trump’s [call](#) to rise up and demand that “students are receiving a patriotic, pro-American education.”

But we would be remiss to focus on the culture war raging in schools without noticing the other education agenda that rightwing politicians have rolled out across the nation. As Jessica Levin explains, Republican lawmakers in more than a dozen states have [introduced](#) bills to create new school voucher programs, or expand existing ones, that redirect money meant for funding public education into private schools. Some of these bills failed; others have now [become law](#).

Levin describes the various ways these voucher programs shape-shift into deceptive “scholarships,” “tax credits,” and “savings accounts” that sound pleasing to the public but hide an intent to defund public schools, create a private “marketplace” of unaccountable private academies, and further “stratify communities along racial and economic lines.”

It’s not hard to see how the two agendas—turning public schools into acrimonious battlegrounds over race and politics while enticing parents to abandon them—would work hand-in-hand.

Proponents of failed education reform are largely at fault for this current state of affairs, either because they didn’t see it coming or because they saw it coming but didn’t care.

But the greater harm the education reformers committed was to leave, in the wake of their collapsed movement, virtually nothing of value. This created a void for the extremist factions that now dominate the GOP to fill, allowing them to foment a culture war against public schools.

If proponents of now-defunct reform policies are at all sincere about listening to those closest to the ground, several authors in this issue should have their ear.

Jitu Brown and Beth Glenn, for instance, channel the pulse of grassroots organizations across the country who are intent on making the reopening of schools an opportunity to renew calls for equity in the education system and “to push for full funding for schools” and its fair distribution to support our neediest students.

Maria C. Fernandez and Jonathan Stith point to the demand bubbling up from the ground to reduce police presence in public schools and end the “criminalization of Black, brown, and poor students in the name of public safety.” They call attention to recent successes in removing cops from schools that are now quietly being undone, and they urge instead for increased investments in supports that address the real needs of young people.

Whatever leadership imperatives become the new driving force behind the next education policy directives, they are doomed to irrelevance if they ignore the needs and interests of teachers. And teachers, as Peter Greene describes, are in a vulnerable place. “This summer has been about trying to recover, regroup, and recapture some sense of normal,” he writes. “And yet there is lingering concern that we may not get there.”

Greene hastens to point out there are “real major issues” in our schools and “manufactured issues” that get in the way of progress.

Clearly, teachers, parents, and students want us to deal with the real issues that need attending to in our schools and shed the manufactured ones that pervaded the reform agenda and dominate the current culture war carried out by rightwing radicals. Are we ready to do that?

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