

Democrats for Education Reform?

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Anyone who doubts that the Democratic Party has morphed from “liberal” to “neoliberal” in regard to education policy should check out the Democrats for Education Reform (DER). Their program is straight from the neoliberal thinktanks, and they make no effort to disguise the origins of their ideas or politics. In Denver they are hosting a talk with “Rick” Hess, who heads the education policy unit at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). Ten years ago AEI would have been called “far-right wing.” But since high-profile Democrats, like Cory Booker, the African American mayor of Newark, NJ, (who is on the Board of Directors of Democrats for Education Reform) now march to AEI’s tune about schools, maybe we have to refer to AEI as “centrist”?

The guiding principle of DER is that schools have “become captive to powerful, entrenched interests that too often put the demands of adults before the educational needs of children.” By “entrenched interests” they do NOT mean the for-profit companies that run schools and take care of “outsourced” school services, like school lunch, teacher hiring and professional development. Nor does DER want to toss out corporations that produce and grade standardized tests - and in doing so control what is taught to our kids. They think what what Stephen Ball refers to as “education for sale” and the “commodification of everything.” is just dandy. Nope, the only “entrenched interests” they want to control are.... teacher unions.

Their attack on unions is straight out of the neoliberal blueprint for education, articulated in its most unvarnished form in a draft report of the World Bank “Making Services Work for Poor People.” As this playbook for crushing the unions puts it , teachers and their unions are a threat to global prosperity. Why? Because “With their political power, teachers and doctors are able to protect their incomes when there is pressure for budget cuts.. Many governments have responded by creating a second class of teachers who are outside the civil service, and are correspondingly paid less with fewer benefits. The experience in several West African countries shows that there are many people willing to take these jobs (a recent announcement in Senegal generated 30,000 applicants for 1,000 positions); even if they are less qualified, the evidence on student performance is mixed; and, over time, these contractual workers have come to dominate the public service, as in Benin.” (p.6)

With the wholesale firing of teachers in the “failing” school in Rhode Island, an act lauded by Obama and Arne Duncan, we see the World Bank’s program in Benin and Senegal come to the US.