

Obama's panacea for education: charter schools

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The NY Times reported on June 23 that Arne Duncan, Education Secretary, warned that inferior charter schools are ruining the reputation of the entire charter school project, endangering the administration's initiative to make charter schools the focal point of school reform. Each charter school is essentially its own miniscule school district (a "local education authority," in educational policy-speak). Each school decides what and how it teaches and establishes its own operating procedures, including hiring and firing of employees. In the US, the state government decides the ground rules for creating and operating charter schools. Obama is pushing for the states to increase the number of charter schools and decrease regulations on how they operate. Duncan's admonishment to charter schools to get rid of the bad apples is a call for self-regulation. But as we saw in the financial meltdown, self-regulation is no regulation at all. Charter schools go by different names in different countries, but like the rest of the neoliberal school reforms, they are now almost universal. (When I said "universal" in a recent speech, UK researcher Stephen Ball corrected me: Finland and North Korea are the holdouts.) The World Bank has forced developing countries to accept neoliberal restructuring of their educational systems as a pre-requisite for loans. In Europe and North America, the concept has been sold as the panacea for academic underachievement of poor and working class students, as we see in Obama's rhetoric. What's not often said by (neo)liberals defending charter schools is that in lieu of governmental oversight, schooling will be controlled by standardized testing. Also, one of the key regulatory elements that goes out the window with charter schools is the protection of a union contract. (See "Neoliberalism, Teachers, and Teaching: Understanding the Assault" in *New Politics*, Vol.XII, no. 1) The charter school scam relies on the premise that all we need to improve schools is old-fashioned entrepreneurship, more individual effort - teacher and principal effort. Missing in this project is attention to any of the other conditions that schools serving wealthy parents make sure they provide, like support services (psychologists, social workers), professional development, and, of course, high(er) salaries that increase with education and experience, to induce experienced teachers to remain on the job. The Obama/Duncan formula: All we need to improve schools for poor kids is charter schools, "hero" principals, and a quarter-million "great teachers." Those teachers don't stay very long under the conditions many charter schools enforce, including 80 hour work weeks. Charter schools create a few options in neighborhoods that have poor public schools, but they cannot be the primary lever for improving education for most of the kids who need better schools. In the UK, charter schools are called "academies," and a vigorous opposition to them is being waged by the Anti Academy Alliance, organized with assistance from the National Union of Teachers, (NUT). We need a similar response from the NEA and AFT, but with the state of bureaucratization and mentality of fearful acquiescence in both unions, we are unlikely to see the present officials provide it. So what we really need is for teachers to take back their unions. We've seen one such victory, in Los Angeles and a new, promising group is starting in New York City. Activist teachers in Washington, DC and Chicago are also mounting challenges to leaders who refuse to lead. Their effort will depend, in part, on their ability to see beyond US borders, to see neoliberalism's global picture. Lois Weiner teaches education at New Jersey City University and is on the editorial board of *New Politics*. She is the co-editor with Mary Compton of "The global assault on teachers, teaching, and their unions. Stories for resistance," Palgrave Macmillan. See more about teacher union struggles throughout the world.