

Pushing back on Wall Street's educational agenda

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The gutsy young people who are encamping on Wall Street, the “Occupy Wall Street” movement, are probably doing more to save public education than anyone else. (Pace, Diane Ravitch). In pushing back on the economy, they are creating space for a meaningful discussion of what schools can and should do — and what they can't. The mantra repeated daily in the media, by politicians from both parties, is that education can solve the nation's economic problems. A heart-breaking interview with an aeronautical engineer, a Ph.D. and Dartmouth graduate who cannot find work and is now homeless illustrates why education is not the “one true path out of poverty” as Arne Duncan acclaims.

This articulate middle-aged man has done everything that Arne Duncan (and the Obama administration) say one needs to do to “make it.” Look at those credentials! But he's homeless because of circumstances beyond his control but well within the control of the federal government. His parents became ill and the gaping holes in the social safety net forced him to sell all that he owned to pay for their health care and living expenses. He lost his job at Lockheed just as the economy collapsed. He faces double discrimination in his job search because he is an older African American. His educational success hasn't saved him from becoming impoverished.

We can't understand what's happening in education policy without looking at what Wall Street's man in Washington is doing. While the media has been hyping Obama's willingness to change its rhetoric about unemployment, to take on the Republicans, what's ignored is that his verbal combativeness on the debt ceiling combines the offer to cut Medicare.

There's been a rhetorical shift but no substantive change. As long as Obama and the Democrats refuse to take on the Right, demanding big tax increases on corporations and the wealthy, making Wall Street pay for creating jobs it has destroyed, education policy will be used as a substitute for economic policies that will put people to work. Finally, with “Occupy Wall Street” movement, we're the pushback on the Right.

One danger I see is that this young movement will be hood-winked into giving up the mobilization to elect progressive Democrats, as occurred in Wisconsin. When “bold progressives” vow that they won't support Obama in 2012 unless he shapes up and take his new rhetoric as reality, I hope they'll be pressed to explain how they went wrong in supporting Obama in the last election. What's their strategy to avoid a repeat? Nay-sayers to independent politics, to our forming a new party, are quick to say this is a hopeless venture. But they fail to explain what will be different this time around when we once again look to the Democrats to save us.

Barry Finger's analysis explains the reasons the Democratic Party won't — can't — deliver on its promises. Those “bold progressives” who want us to support more Democrats in 2012 are setting us up for more betrayals. In the meantime, education policy will be set by Wall Street.