

Talking About the Corporate Takeover of Public Schools

There's a one-sided debate taking place in our country about how to best improve our schools and help more students succeed.

The current reform debate has been hijacked by a small but well-financed group frequently referred to as "the education reformers." Many of their proposals amount to a corporate takeover of our public schools.

The policies they push include an over-reliance on high stakes standardized tests to evaluate teachers and close down schools and policies designed to drain resources from public schools and divert them to private schools.

So far corporate education reformers have been communicating in a vacuum without strong, values-laden push-back from teachers, parents or students. The corporate reformers have captured the debate but the solutions they offer remain highly suspect and haven't been shown to work.

Absent other choices and messages, Americans—especially those in neighborhoods with struggling schools—will begin to embrace opponents' solutions, believing that they are the only options available for improving education.

To win back the debate, we need to be able to counter their messages, and advance our own solutions.

Children centered messaging is critical to turning the discussion in our favor. The public wants education reforms that put the needs and interests of students first.

Anti-corporate messaging can play a role but is secondary.

The following are lessons learned from polls of the American public :

- **We're for investing in education and preparing our kids with the skills they need for 21st century jobs, not allowing a corporate takeover of public schools. That's wrong for our children, our community and taxpayers.** The phrase 'corporate takeover of public schools' works better than "privatization of our public schools." Corporate takeover elicits a greater negative reaction than privatizing, outsourcing, and putting public schools in private hands.
- **Private school vouchers drain needed resources from public schools. We should focus on improving public schools rather than sending taxpayer money to private schools.** To counter seductive voucher arguments, present voters with a choice - improve public schools OR send taxpayer dollars to private schools. A majority will choose improving public schools. Presenting this choice is stronger than arguments that vouchers enrich corporations that own private schools.
- **Parent triggers are a corporate takeover of public schools. They hand over local schools to out-of-state corporations that know nothing about the kids in our community and only care about making profits.** This latest "reform" – allowing parents to turn over a public school to a private company to manage by merely signing a petition – still isn't very well known. Arguments about the divisive nature of the parent trigger (pitting teachers against parents; pitting one group of parents against another group of parents) do not work as well as arguments

about handing over schools to out-of-state private management companies that know nothing about the kids in that community and only care about making profits.

- **Online schools turn local public schools over to out-of-state corporations who operate them with the goal of making profits, not helping children. And, they have not been proven to provide students with a high quality education.**
- **The over emphasis on standardized tests is making teachers teach to the test, instead of helping children learn to solve problems. Parents know that test scores don't define their children and they don't define teacher quality either. We should use tests to help teachers improve students learning, not to punish teachers.** When opponents talk about standardized testing we win. Public polling by PDK and Gallop bears this out. Their latest polling (August 2013) showed that fewer than 25 percent of Americans believe increased testing has helped the performance of local public schools.

Talking about privatization doesn't work

Some reasons that a majority of Americans aren't likely to support defining opponents as privatizers or characterizing their agenda as privatization.

- Research has shown Americans are conditionally open to the idea of privatization. While there are individuals who hold stronger views one way or the other the prevailing perspective is that privatization is a sensible option in many cases if done right. This open attitude makes it difficult to argue categorically against the practice.
- Businesses/ corporations are seen as lean, effective, innovative and sharp since they must deal with competition, attract customers and make a profit.
- Americans tend not to focus on the genuine value of things that have been collectively built for the common good – airports, water systems, school systems etc. **But** when they think about why someone is interested in getting control of these systems/structures, they gain a new appreciation for this value.

What we are against . . .

- Corporate takeover of our schools
- One-size-fits-all reforms
- Risking our children's future
- Allowing kids to fall through the cracks
- Politicians, CEOs and outside special interest groups who think they know how to fix our schools without spending much time in the classroom
- Losing an entire generation that won't get a second chance
- Forcing teachers to teach to the test
- Shortchanging our kids on education...[in a way that is] irresponsible and shortsighted
- America falling farther and farther behind other countries when it comes to educating our children to compete in the worldwide economy
- Treating children like widgets

What we are for. . .

- Big-picture reform
- Investing in our public schools and our children's future
- Ensuring every child has a quality teacher
- Well-rounded education that includes history, music, arts, PE and vocational training
- Early childhood learning opportunities, so all kids enter school ready to learn
- Giving teachers the tools to help every child succeed
- Reducing class size to give kids the individual attention they need