The end of public schools? Privatizing schools and education policy in New York.

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Over the last two decades, primary and secondary education in the state of New York has been increasingly privatized. First, public funding is increasingly diverted from the traditional public schools and transferred to privately managed charter schools. Second, policy is increasingly privatized as philanthropists (e.g., Bill Gates), corporations (e.g., Pearson Inc), national non-governmental organizations (e.g., Teach for America), international non-government organizations (e.g., OECD), and wealthy investors, in particular hedge fund managers (Teachout & Zahn, 2014), have a greater, although obscured, role than the public in creating education policy.

In this paper we provide examples of the role the groups named above have played in creating policies that emphasize privatization and high-stakes standardized testing, such as applying for and adopting the requirements under President Obama’s Race to the Top initiatives. We also provide evidence that privatization has not improved student learning, but has exacerbated education inequality, and harmed teaching as a profession.

We argue that the recent reforms are based on a corporate model of privatization, and market competition with quantitative evaluations of students, teachers, and schools based on students’ scores on standardized tests. These reforms reflect (1) a shift in the social imaginary (Taylor, 2004) from social democratic liberalism to market fundamentalism (Block & Somers, 2014), (2) the rise of a plutocracy that uses its wealth to dominate education policy making, and (3) a shift from government to governance, in which government “no longer simply relies on rules and their hierarchical imposition” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) to regulate individuals but operates through an assemblage of organizations that control teachers and students (Ball, 2008).

We conclude by arguing that education in New York is increasingly under the control of individuals who are unelected and unaccountable. However, parents and teachers increasingly aim to reverse the recent education reforms, the diminishing social services, and increasing inequality by promoting a new social democratic imaginary.


