

Why Public Schools Are On the GOP's Hit List

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Thom Hartmann ✓

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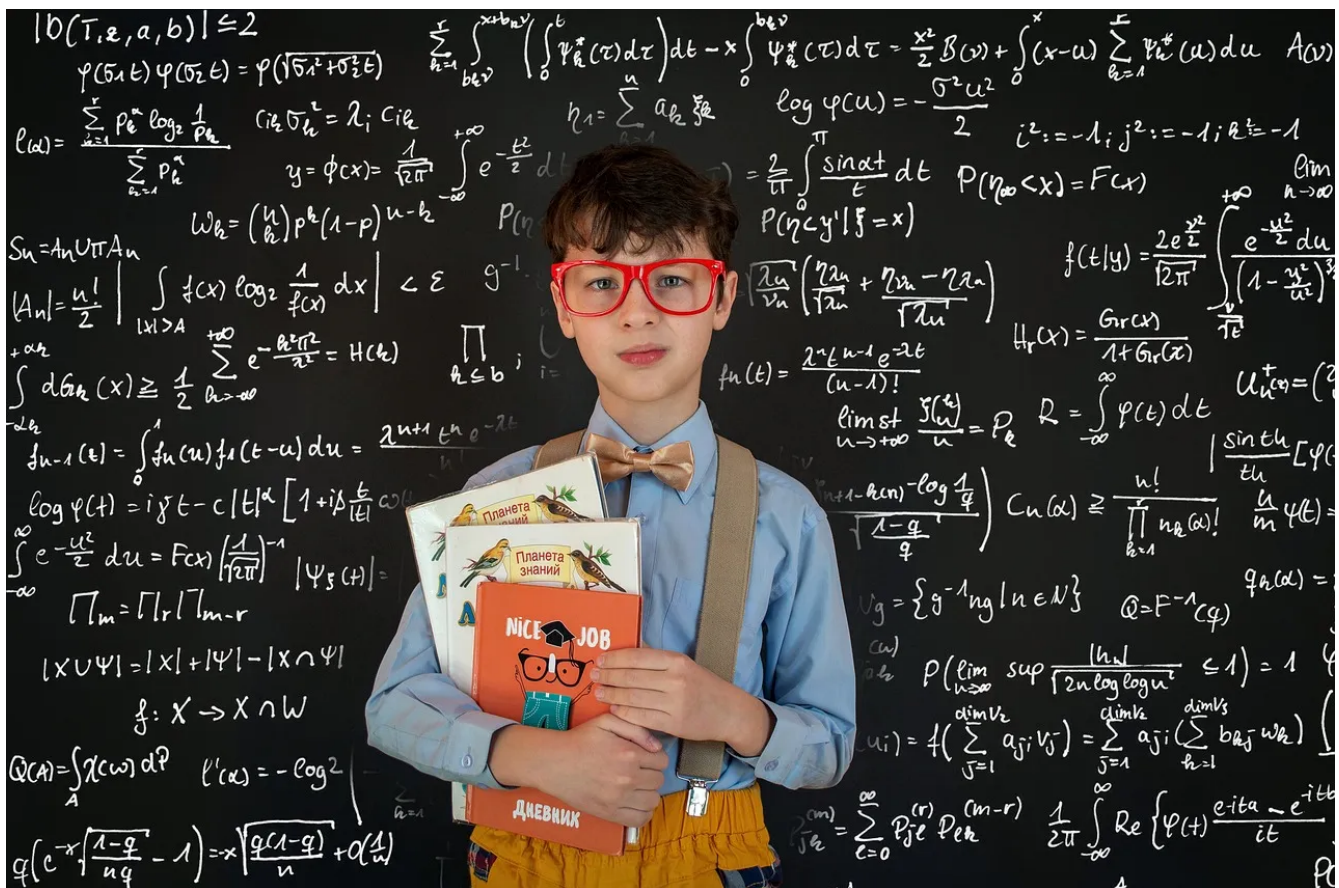


Image by [Victoria Model](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Former Tea Party congressman and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently put a bulls-eye on the back of the president of the 1.7 million-member American Federation of Teachers.

“I tell the story often — I get asked ‘Who’s the most dangerous person in the world? Is it Chairman Kim, is it Xi Jinping?’” Pompeo [told](#) Semafor’s Shelby Talcott.

“The most dangerous person in the world is Randi Weingarten. It’s not a close call. If you ask, ‘Who’s the most likely to take this republic down?’ It would be the teacher’s unions, and the filth that they’re teaching our kids...”

Louise and I have known, respected, and admired Randi for years and she’s been a frequent guest on my program: her number one interest is providing the highest quality education to as many American children as possible. Full stop.

So why would Pompeo, pursuing the 2024 Republican nomination for president, risk triggering an American domestic terrorist to train his sites on her? Why would an educated man have such antipathy toward public school teachers?

Public schools are on the GOP’s hit list, just as they [were in Chile](#) during the Pinochet regime, and for the same reasons:

— **Fascism flourishes when people are ignorant.**

— Private for-profit schools are an efficient way to transfer billions from tax revenues into the coffers of “education entrepreneurs” who then recycle that money into Republican political campaigns (just like they’ve done with private for-profit prisons).

— **Private schools are most likely to be segregated by race and class, which appeals to the bigoted base of the Republican party.**

— Most public school teachers are unionized, and the GOP hates unions.

— **While public school boards are our most basic and vigorous form of democracy, private schools are generally unaccountable to the public.**

— Whitewashing America’s racial and genocidal history while ignoring the struggles of women and queer folk further empowers straight white male supremacy.

— **Nothing inspires fear and terror in the minds of parents than a threat to their children, and the GOP — being totally committed to enriching the rich and**

impoverishing everybody else — has nothing else to sell than fear and hate to win elections. (See item #1: fascism.)

Umberto Eco, who had a ringside seat to the rise of Mussolini, noted in his “14 indicators of fascism” that dumbing down the populace by lowering educational standards was critical to producing a compliant populace.

“All the Nazi or Fascist schoolbooks,” he wrote, “made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning.”

Ironically, this very use of public schools to promote a political agenda was the foundation David Koch cited when, in 1980, he attacked American public schools during his run for Vice President on the Libertarian Party ticket.

“We condemn compulsory education laws ... and we call for the immediate repeal of such laws,” proclaimed his platform. “We advocate the complete separation of education and State. Government schools lead to the indoctrination of children and interfere with the free choice of individuals. Government ownership, operation, regulation, and subsidy of schools and colleges should be ended.”

It was a stark contrast from the founders of our nation, who well understood the importance of universal quality public education. The first law mandating public schools paid for with taxpayer dollars was passed in Massachusetts in 1647: to this day, that state is notable for its historic emphasis on education.

As Thomas Jefferson, who founded America’s first tuition-free public college (the University of Virginia), noted in a letter to Colonel Charles Yancey on January 6, 1816:

“If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

The American president who immediately preceded him, our second, John Adams, also weighed in on the importance of public education in a letter to his old friend John Jebb when, in 1785, Adams was serving in London as America’s first Minister to Great Britain.

He'd seen the consequences of poverty and illiteracy in both the US and England and was horrified:

“The social science will never be much improved, until the people unanimously know and consider themselves as the fountain of power, and until they shall know how to manage it wisely and honestly. Reformation must begin with the body of the people, which can be done only, to effect, in their educations.

“The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people, and must be willing to bear the expenses of it. There should not be a district of one mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the expense of the people themselves.”

But the United States **spends** almost a trillion dollars a year on primary school education, an expense category just below healthcare and even more than the Pentagon budget: there are massive profits to be made if privatized entities can skim even a few percent off the top.

Those profits, in turn, can be used — with the Supreme Court's blessing — to legally bribe elected officials to further gut public schools and transfer even more of our tax dollars to private schools and their stockholders.

This pursuit of America's education dollars is nothing new. The first American president to put an anti-public-schools crusader in charge of the Education Department was Ronald Reagan.

At the time, our public schools were the envy of the world and had recently raised up a generation of scientists and innovators that brought us everything from the transistor to putting men on the moon.

Reagan's Education Secretary Bill Bennett is probably **most famous for having claimed that**, “You could abort every Black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down.” And then aggressively standing behind his quote in **repeated media** appearances.

Reagan and Bennett oversaw the gutting of Federal support for civics education, **cutting** the nation's federal education budget by 18.5%.

This led to the situation today where the group that runs national exams of eighth-graders across the country, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, determined in 2018 that **only 24% of US students** were “proficient in civics.” It’s gotten so bad that the Lincoln Project is launching a K-12 civics program of their own called **the Franklin Project**.

George W. Bush continued the tradition, proposing an 8% cut to education and welfare budgets.

After initiating the privatization of Medicare in 2003 with the Medicare Advantage scam (a model for privatizing education), his Education Secretary, Rod Paige, **called** the nation’s largest teacher’s union, the National Education Association, a “terrorist organization.”

Donald Trump and Betsy DeVos then proposed cutting 12% or \$8.5 billion out of the federal education budget, while allocating over \$5 billion in taxpayer dollars to flow into the money bins of their private school cronies.

I started this article with Pompeo’s essentially calling Randi Weingarten a terrorist. Unions as saboteurs is a viewpoint widely held across the Republican Party and among rightwing billionaires.

But it’s simply not true: teachers’ unions have been a primary force in improving the quality of American education for almost a century.

Eunice S. Han is an economics **professor and researcher** at the University of Utah, and formerly was with Wellesley College. She did exhaustive research into the impact of teachers’ unions on teacher quality and educational outcomes: it’s the single-most definitive study done on the subject to date.

Her **findings were unambiguous** and rebut the GOP’s talking point that teachers’ unions “protect bad teachers”:

“[T]eachers unions, by negotiating higher wages for teachers, lower the quit probability of high-ability teachers but raise the dismissal rate of underperforming

teachers, as higher wages provide districts greater incentive to select better teachers.”

Looking at the most comprehensive set of national data available on teacher quality and educational outcome from “the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): the School and Staffing Survey (SASS) for three waves (2003-2004, 2007- 2008, and 2011-2012), its supplement Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS) for each wave of the SASS, and the School Districts Finance Survey (SDFS),” she found:

“The data confirms that, compared to districts with weak unionism, districts with strong unionism dismiss more low-quality teachers and retain more high-quality teachers. The empirical analysis shows that this dynamic of teacher turnover in highly unionized districts raises average teacher quality and improves student achievement.”

But don't bother trying to tell that to Republicans: they know that unions are terrorists, or at least give nightmares to bad bosses and poorly run businesses that exploit their workers. As Trump's Education Secretary Betsy DeVos [told](#) an ALEC meeting of Republican state legislators and corporate lobbyists in July, 2017:

“They've made it clear that they care more about a system, one created in the 1800s, than they do about individual students.”

In other words, “Don't bother me with facts.”

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were right about public education, and privatizing it is as much a crime against the commons and our democracy as was privatizing our prisons, over half the Pentagon budget, and Medicare.

Rightwing billionaires are now funding “Liberty” and “Freedom” groups to attack and take over public school boards, seeking to ghettoize their schools, drive out unionized teachers, and impose a gender-bigoted, white supremacist, and anti-science curriculum. (Only 40% of our schools today even [teach evolution](#), as that's become so “controversial” again.)

Of all our democratic institutions, from Congress to state houses to city councils, the most on-the-ground, closest-to-the-people are school boards.

They're the most vibrant and often most important of our governmental bodies, designed to express and facilitate the will of local parents and voters. And a great springboard to other elected offices: many members of Congress began their political careers running for a school board.

Private schools, of course, don't have school boards. They're accountable to their shareholders and CEOs.

Steve Bannon and other rightwing personalities have, for the past several years as part of their effort to destroy public education, been aggressively encouraging their followers to run for public school boards and, where they don't win, show up at every meeting to make their members lives miserable.

It's an area where Democrats and progressives have dropped the ball, big time.

If you're a parent or grandparent, or even just a concerned citizen, there is no better or more crucial time to show up at your local school board than now. And bring your friends and neighbors with you.

11 Comments



Write a comment...



Claudia Bloom Nov 25

Save our Schools in Az. has tried to get many citizens initiatives passed that prevent vouchers for all. This last one this summer was thwarted by the legislature and paid shills of Betsy DeVos. The citizens vote for our bills but the Koch controlled legislature stops the process.

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Peggy Magilen Nov 25

What you have written, Thom, is so important, and goes along with what you've laid out since the Regan 80's. Hard to believe what's happened, the most recent push to privatize education, Trump and DeVos' outrageous moves, and the horror stories of how poorly both teachers and kids actually are treated in those schools, most all of it by the creeping, money-at-all costs, power grabs.

Adding to this important warning you have shared, I would like to say that there is an additional step we can be aware of to save, improve and re-empower public education. Here is one quote you shared, De Vos, speaking:

"They've made it clear that they care more about a system, one created in the 1800s, than they do about individual students."

Like on a mobious strip which turns back on itself, showing the opposite side, this statement does indicate ways that we must reorient public education, a direction being called for now. I can only speak briefly of it here, but the times and tides of public comment are indicating the direction we must turn, one I am driven to follow.

Our current educational system Was created in the industrial times of the 1800's, this correct. One example, the large British Empire needed a way to keep all corners of it running, in touch with the central power. Like in the industrial and piece by piece mode of production, yet prevalent in workhouses in China and elsewhere, there are photos from the 19th and 20th century of people sitting in rows, in big or small rooms, sewing, stamping, etc. or learning information for their part of the bigger project. The pictures are exactly the same as our classrooms still, rows of kids learning material and tested on it for

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