

TEACHING AND TRUTH

The Bigger Scandal

Pauline Lipman

A story in the Chicago Tribune by reporter Azam Ahmed revealed that when Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was head of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), he maintained a confidential list of influential people seeking help in getting particular children into the best schools. Amy Goodman and Juan González examined this story on their radio program Democracy Now! via interviews with Azam Ahmed, teacher and educational activist Jitu Brown, and Pauline Lipman, professor of educational policy studies and director of the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education. Lipman pointed out that the controversy over the VIP list hid an even greater scandal: the undermining of democratic public education by the growth of two-tiered educational systems in cities such as Chicago. The article below is taken from her remarks on that broadcast.

The larger scandal is that Chicago has basically a two-tiered education system. While a handful of selective enrollment magnet schools, or boutique schools, have been set up in gentrifying and affluent neighborhoods under the Renaissance 2010 initiative, and charter schools in African American and Latino communities, there has been a simultaneous disinvestment in neighborhood schools. Parents across the city are scrambling to try to get their kids into a few good schools. Instead of creating quality public schools in every neighborhood, CPS has created this two-tiered system. And under Renaissance 2010, CPS is closing down neighborhood schools and replacing them with charter schools and a privatized education system. They are firing or laying off certified teachers, dismantling locally elected school councils, and creating a market of public education in Chicago. This is the bigger scandal. This is now the national agenda for education under the Obama administration.

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Duncan is not an educator by trade. He was a functionary in the administration of Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. Chicago schools are under mayoral control, which is another part of Obama and Duncan's national agenda under the Race to the Top competitive federal grant program. As a result, we have a school system that is led by virtually no educators. There is only one educator in a high position. The board members are all appointed by Daley and are either bankers or corporate heads. The CEO of schools before Duncan, Paul Vallas, was in Daley's budget office. The following CEO, Ron Huberman, ran the Chicago Transit Authority. Thus we have a school system that, as a whole, is being led by corporate managers, not by educators. This is revealed by the fact that there's basically no research that supports any of the interventions that they've made under Renaissance 2010. And there's a good deal of research that demonstrates that this initiative has been damaging to students and to communities and has not improved education in Chicago.

Perhaps the best phrase to describe what is happening nationally is what Naomi Klein calls "disaster capitalism." We have a situation in which there's a fiscal crisis in the cities and in the states. We have a situation in which we have a long history of disinvestment in public schools in communities of color. There is now a move to privatize public education, similar to what happened in New Orleans. The devastation left by Hurricane Katrina was seen as an opportunity for the state to move in and privatize public schools. The federal stimulus money that's being offered now to the states is being offered on the condition that they raise charter school caps, that they tie teacher evaluations to students' test scores, that they close what they call "failing schools," that they turn them over to private turnaround operators. We have a neoliberal project at work that was tested out in Chicago and is now being pushed nationally. One of the ways this was dramatized so clearly to me was that almost immediately after Arne Duncan was selected to be Secretary of Education, he flew to Detroit, which is one of the most disinvested, economically devastated cities in the country. Their school system has been decimated because of the economic crisis in Detroit. He offered millions of dollars, but only on the condition that they would implement the Chicago plan.

In Chicago, we've seen a really devastating impact in many of the neighborhoods where schools have been closed. The school is one of the central institutions in a neighborhood—a neighborhood that is and has been suffering from unemployment, economic devastation, and the transformation of public housing. These schools become sort of the core of the neighborhood. Take, for example, Anderson Elementary School in the West Town area of Chicago. With a primarily Latino and African American population, it was one of the schools that you could say was really a good neighborhood school. That area has become extremely gentrified; as it was gentrified, many people had to move out. The people who remained, and even the people who moved out, continued

to send their children to that school, because it did in fact represent and anchor the neighborhood. In 2008, there was a huge battle over the proposed phase-out of Anderson Elementary. Despite massive protests on the part of the parents—pickets, demonstrations, research that they did, busing of people down to the school board to protest—the mayor-appointed Board of Education voted to phase it out under Renaissance 2010. The school was turned over to LaSalle Language Academy, one of the most coveted, selective public elementary schools in the city branded for the new, gentrifying, middle-class folks who had moved into that neighborhood. We've seen school closures and phase-outs happening around the city in African American and Latino neighborhoods. There is one ward on the West Side of the city where they no longer have a single public high school. Every high school there is a charter high school. What that means is that parents are looking not just in their neighborhoods, but all around the city, to try to find a school to get their children into. It's a market. They're shopping for schools. And so, all the roles that those neighborhood schools have historically played to provide community support and continuity have been totally disrupted.