NOTEBOOK

The Big Enchilada
By Jonathan Kozol

Loyal defenders of our nation's public schools have for decades ardently opposed the concept of "school vouchers" and other privatizing schemes that threaten to dismantle the democratic legacy of public education. In recent years, however, even as privatizing forces have made massive inroads into public schools, many of those who profess to believe in public education have been lulled into a puzzling passivity and silence on this issue. But the voucher movement has not gone away, and the threat it represents to democratic education is more dangerous than ever.

Privatizing advocates tend to employ a familiar set of strategies in their campaign to replace public education, which they deride as "Soviet" or "socialist" in nature, with a market system in which public dollars no longer go to public schools but are distributed directly to parents, who in theory will be free to spend the money at either a public school or a private institution. Recognizing as they do that vouchers have had little appeal to parents in suburban areas, where public schools are highly funded and the kids generally do well, voucher advocates focus instead on winning over parents of poor children in the inner-city schools, whom they promise to deliver from the clutches of a failing "state monopoly."

To that end, one of the primary arguments made on behalf of vouchers is that schools receiving them will be open to low-income children of all levels of ability and will not favor the children of better-educated and more "savvy" parents. What is never explained is how exactly the forces of selection will be circumvented. Even in the public system as it stands, and even in nominally non-exclusive schools, *self-selectivity* manages to guarantee that children of the more effective parents are more likely to get into what are often called "the boutique schools" within any given neighborhood. In almost every case in which a limited number of such schools exist, it is the more aggressive and more knowledgeable parents who hear about them first and navigate the application process most successfully.

Advocates for vouchers nonetheless insist that any difficulties presented by self-selectivity will cease to be real problems once market mechanisms are in place. One of the most influential of these advocates, a skillful and politically sophisticated propagandist named John Chubb, dismisses any likelihood that parents who are overwhelmed by problems in their private lives may be incapable of making wise decisions—or, more important, that they may find it difficult to act on these decisions. "It is really hard for me to believe," Chubb once told the *New York Times*, that if vouchers were available to parents of poor children, "those people couldn't decide on what they prefer." He accused critics of voucher schemes of being condescending to the poor, of arguing, in essence, that poor parents are "too stupid" to select the schools they want their children to attend.

But Chubb, who is now a top executive at Edison Schools, one of the largest private education corporations, does not hesitate to contradict himself when speaking to a different kind of audience. One of the disadvantages of public schools, Chubb has said in a more candid statement he coauthored with another voucher advocate, Terry Moe, is that they "must take whoever walks in the door" and "do not have the luxury of being able to select" their students. By comparison, they note in the pages of a right-wing policy review unlikely to be seen by parents of poor children, under a voucher system a "constellation of… different schools serving different kinds of students differently would probably emerge." And in a book advancing private education markets, Chubb and Moe have made the additional argument that schools "must be free to admit as many or as few students as they want, based on whatever criteria they think relevant—intelligence, interest, motivation, behavior, special needs."

Obviously, the exercise of school choice under a market system would belong only in small part to the parents of the poor. The ultimate choices would be made by those who own or operate the schools. This is a rather different notion of school choice from the one most voucher advocates put forth in seeking popular support, but it is not the only example of a noticeable semantic shift they make in turning their attention from one audience to another. Frequently, for instance, advocates for vouchers point to Roman Catholic schools as the sort of private institutions that might flourish in a system based on market competition, whereas they rarely speak of profit-driven schools, run by private corporations, as potential beneficiaries of the system they propose. The idealistic mo-

Jonathan Kozol's new book, Letters to a Young Teacher, *will be published this month by Crown.*

tives that are commonly identified with inner-city Catholic schools are seized upon in order to position the discussion on an elevated ground of seemingly unselfish and high-minded goals. Meanwhile, in writings narrowly directed at investors, all of these higher motives disappear, and other benefits to be derived from vouchers suddenly emerge. This is where the masks come off and all pretenses of altruism are replaced by practical considerations of a wholly different kind.

Some years ago, a friend who works on Wall Street handed me a stock-market prospectus in which a group of analysts at an investment-banking firm known as Montgomery Securities described the financial benefits to be derived from privatizing our public schools. "The education industry," according to these analysts, "represents, in our opinion, the final frontier of a number of sectors once under public control" that "have either voluntarily opened" or, they note in pointed terms, have "been forced" to open up to private enterprise. Indeed, they write, "the education industry represents the largest market opportunity" since health-care services were privatized during the 1970s. Referring to private education companies as "EMOs" ("Education Management Organizations"), they note that college education also offers some "attractive investment returns" for corporations, but then come back to what they see as the much greater profits to be gained by moving into public elementary and secondary schools. "The larger developing opportunity is in the K-12 EMO market, led by private elementary school providers," which, they emphasize, "are well positioned to exploit potential political reforms such as school vouchers." From the point of view of private profit, one of these analysts enthusiastically observes, "the K-12 market is the Big Enchilada."

Language as outright cynical as this is never heard in the benign and civic-minded arguments that voucher advocates present when speaking to poor parents, who are unlikely to respond with favor to the notion that vouchers could unlock a new "frontier" for profit-making companies with an appetite for big (or little) "enchiladas." The black and Hispanic kids with whom I've worked for forty years in Boston and New York have no reason to suspect that their little destinies, downgraded and diminished for so long by governmental penury, have now become the object of so large a corporate appetite.

Voucher programs, admittedly, have yet to be instituted on the widespread scale that privatizing interests hope for. Only a few urban systems, notably in Cleveland and Milwaukee—and, on a limited scale, in New Orleans and Washington, D.C.—have put into place explicitly labeled voucher plans, and these have produced very mixed results. Elsewhere, conservative political leaders, such as former Florida governor Jeb Bush, have tried and failed to institute voucher programs in their states. The consequent impression that the danger has now passed, however, is naive. In spite of setbacks in securing vouchers in the open and unvarnished form originally conceived by Chicago economist Milton Friedman, the ideological father of the movement, the private sector has nonetheless moved into the daily operation of our inner-city schools through a multitude of avenues of which the larger public is almost entirely unaware.

One of the early strategies employed by private corporations to soften resistance to their presence in our public schools was the creation of so-called business partnerships between the poorest inner-city schools and large companies. The financial side of the partnership usually turned out to be inconsequential. Kerr-McGee, the multinational petrochemical giant, gave one impoverished public school in Oklahoma City the trivial annual sum of $36 for each pupil. In return, one of the company's executives was appointed to direct a "governance committee" to oversee the school operations, and the school consented to be known not simply as a public elementary school but as an "Enterprise School."

Throughout the 1990s, many inner-city schools underwent the same accommodation to the goals and even to the lexicon of their benefactors in the private sector. "Academy of Enterprise" became a common term adopted by such schools in genuflection to their corporate patrons. Principals I met in schools like these would tell me they wished no longer to be known as "principals" but preferred to be known as "Building CEOs" or "Building Managers," in which cases their teachers frequently would be described as "classroom managers." Mission statements heralding the need for children to be trained to serve our nation's interests in "the global marketplace" were posted on the walls of many schools I visited. In practice, however, students were more often being trained for careers at supermarket checkout counters or for the bottom-level "service jobs" at nursing homes.

These rather tentative partnerships were only the beginning of a trend that rapidly took on more serious dimensions. The next and more ambitious stage in the introduction of the private market and its values into public schools did not become possible until the voucher advocates made the well-timed marketing decision to renounce the terminology of "vouchers" and to forgo temporarily their efforts to assume the outright ownership of schools. They settled instead for the management of schools that technically remained within the public sector. Newly created corporations, which characteristically adopted such academically impressive names as "Nobel Learning" or "Edison Schools," began convincing officials in minority districts—first Miami, later Chicago, then Baltimore, Philadelphia, and many other cities—to contract with them to operate at first a few, then larger numbers, of their schools. At present, forty-one Philadelphia public schools are being run by Edison and another profit-making firm, along with a handful of nonprofit private groups. Almost simultaneously, as states were pressured to test and measure children more relentlessly, to institute the same "goal-setting" mechanisms that are used in private industry, the testing affiliates of some of our largest textbook publishers, as well as the major test-prep companies (The Princeton Review and Kaplan, for example), began to move into our public schools, primarily in urban areas. By 2005, the schools were generating $2.8 billion a year for the testing industry.

In both these areas—testing services and the management of schools—the encroachment of the private sector on public education has been mightily assisted by provisions that the Bush Administration managed to insert into the No Child Left Behind Act. Among the various "sanctions" that this highly controversial law imposes upon low-performing schools are two provisions that have opened up these schools to interventions by private corporations on a scale that we have never before seen in the United States.

The first of these provisions stipulates that if a school receiving federal funds under what is known as "Title I," the nation's largest program of assistance for low-income students, fails to raise its test scores by a fixed percentage within three years, it must then use a portion of its funds to purchase what the government describes as "supplemental services." These services must be provided outside of the normal school day and, among other options, by a so-called third-party provider. Although such "services" are defined somewhat ambiguously, most low-income districts have interpreted the term to mean that they must force these schools to institute test-preparation regimens geared explicitly toward raising scores on state exams. Increasingly, too, schools have been pressured into contracts with private corporations that provide these services. Meanwhile, the test-prep companies are actively promoting their success in raising scores to principals who live in terror of the more alarming second stage of federal sanctions they will otherwise incur.

If, despite their expensive test-prep programs, low-performing schools fail to pump up test scores fast enough to meet specific goals within five years, school boards are obliged to shut them down and dismiss their faculties and principals. Such schools will then be either operated directly by the state or reconstituted under an "alternative governance arrangement." Although the provider of such "governance" might be a nonprofit corporation (one that operates a chain of semi-private charter schools, for instance), it is the profit-making firms, with their superb promotional machinery, that are best positioned to obtain these valuable contracts.

It is this prospect—and the even more appealing notion that companies that start by managing these schools might at some future point achieve the right, through changes in state laws, to own the schools as well—that helps explain why EMOs like Edison, which has yet to turn a profit, nonetheless attract vast sums of venture capital. The "big enchilada" represented by the corporate invasion of public schools, even if it takes place only in progressive stages, is sufficiently enticing to investors to keep the money flowing in anticipation of a time when private corporations will not merely nibble at the edges of the public system but will devour it altogether.

No Child Left Behind, with its draconian emphasis on high-stakes testing as the sole determinant of failure or success within a given school, was signed into law in 2002. The warning period for the first wave of low-performing schools is now coming to an end. Thousands of schools that exclusively serve black and Hispanic children have failed to meet their federally mandated goals.

All of these schools, under the stipulations of No Child Left Behind, will soon be ripe for picking by private corporations. Progressive citizens who say they believe in public education, as well as the erstwhile liberal Democratic leadership in the U.S. House and Senate, have failed to recognize and confront this looming crisis. Meanwhile, the richly funded and well-oiled juggernaut of privatization continues to move forward, carving out increasingly large pieces of the public system. If those of us who profess to value public schools and the principle of democratic access they uphold cannot find the courage or the motivation to fight in their defense, we may soon wake up to find that they have been replaced by wholly owned subsidiaries of McDonald's, Burger King, and Wal-Mart. Some $490 billion (4 percent of GNP) is spent on education yearly in the United States. It will be an act of social suicide if liberals blithely continue to dismiss the opportunities this vast amount of money represents for corporate predation. ■