

# WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION?

by Mike Ferner

WHAT IS THE purpose of public education? To teach students to read and write so they can discover this beautiful world; to think critically so they can then help change it for the better? Or to prepare them for their prescribed places in a society where the few govern the many in a “corporatized” world?

From yesterday’s effort to make Dartmouth a public college<sup>1</sup> to today’s efforts to keep corporations out of public education, the fundamental question is who designs our institutions and shapes our common life. This question is obscured, however, by politicians’ and media focus on school uniforms, standards and discipline.

Take “America 2000,” for instance, the six national goals for public education unveiled by President George Bush in 1989. Depending on your perspective, these would save the U.S. educational system from imminent collapse, or dangerously accelerate private influence over public education. Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton supported America 2000, and as president added two goals and convinced Congress to pass the “Goals 2000: Educate America Act” in March, 1994.

Within a month of its passage, the ideological foundation of Goals 2000 was revealed in “Reinventing Education: Entrepreneurship in

America’s Public Schools,” co-authored by Louis Gerstner. A renowned educator with 30 years experience in public schools? No, the CEO of the IBM Corporation. Gerstner *et al.* defined students as “human capital,” and urged schools to compare themselves to each other as “Xerox compares itself to L.L. Bean for inventory control.”

A Goals 2000 follow-up meeting held in 1996 at IBM Corporation headquarters boasted a Fortune 500 planning committee from the IBM, AT&T, Eastman Kodak, and Procter and Gamble corporations. Officials from the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation think tanks, formed to push a corporate agenda, were invited as “resources.”

In his address to this gathering, President Clinton repeatedly urged the adoption of “standards” for students and schools—a concept that, like education itself, depends on who does the defining. Significantly, Clinton agreed with Gerstner that business execs should “know what reforms to speak out for . . . as well as how to help local school districts change some of the things they are now doing so they have a reasonable chance at meeting those standards.”<sup>2</sup>

In a number of states, the standards are measured by high-stakes tests that decide the fates of individual students and whole school

districts. Yet the people who grade them are often college-educated temp workers who read 200 hand-written essays per shift for \$8.50 an hour.<sup>3</sup> Their job is to do what many parents, teachers, and public officials assume is done by trained educators: decide whether your child receives a high school diploma.

### DEBATE WHAT?

Will the growing debate over such standards and tests illuminate the core purpose of public education? Will more and more people realize we've been had? David Stratman, a former educator and the founder of New Democracy, believes the 1983 book, *A Nation at Risk*,<sup>4</sup> helped create the impression that public education is crumbling, an impression he calls as fraudulent as the Social Security "crisis" promoted by those who would corporatize the people's covenant with one another.

It's a little like the con-artist in *The Music Man*, who declares, "We've got trouble, right here in River City..." and the chorus repeats, "trouble, trouble, trouble, trouble..." How do you sell radical changes that would have been completely unacceptable a decade or two ago? You tell people over and over that their institutions have failed, and that only the solutions you are peddling offer any way out of their "troubles."

This corporate-manufactured trouble makes it difficult to identify real problems and solutions, and the resulting conflict underlies debates over school funding and policy. To Stratman, the essence of this debate is:

What are we educating our students for? We can prepare students for unrewarding jobs in an increasingly unequal society, or . . . to understand their world and to change it. The first is education to meet

the needs of the corporate economy. The second is education for democracy.<sup>5</sup>

In the debate over the purpose of education and the means to achieve it, money is not the only measure of what schools need, but without adequate funding, such proven reforms as reducing class sizes and paying higher salaries are impossible. In states such as Ohio, courts have ordered the legislature to come up with a more equitable funding method than property taxes. You might think that grappling with such a fundamental challenge would cause politicians, educators, reporters, parents, and taxpayers to examine every conceivable revenue source. Think again. Ending corporate tax breaks and subsidies is not even on the agenda.

Let's look at where school money *doesn't* come from. The Ohio Department of Taxation reported that in 1998, local governments exempted nearly \$3 billion worth of corporate-owned property (land itself) from taxes in Ohio. Conservatively estimated, at least that much and probably more in "personal" property (buildings, equipment, machinery) has been exempted. State officials, telling us that revealing the actual numbers would compromise a company's competitive position, declare such figures private—beyond the people's authority.

The following examples from my hometown indicate how such staggering ransom is collected. When Owens-Corning Corporation officials threatened to move company headquarters just outside the city limits, Toledo taxpayers coughed up a \$25 million tax break, worth \$1.2 million annually, plus a \$10 million cash grant. Company directors used the first two years' tax savings to pay CEO Glen Hiner's bonus.

DaimlerChrysler Corporation officials, sitting on \$8.6 billion in cash reserves, proposed to rebuild Toledo's existing Jeep factory. In

exchange they demanded and got \$281,000,000 in public assistance from local and state governments.<sup>6</sup> Included were tax abatements that robbed two local school districts of \$86 million. Barely a year after the deal, one of the districts announced that to repair leaking school roofs it needed voters to pass a levy to raise an amount similar to the abatement. The other district proposed canceling bus service after voters defeated an operating levy.

### THE LESSON PLAN

As an elected official in Toledo, I used to see two big problems with such corporate tax relief: school revenues took big hits and we hapless human persons remaining on the tax rolls had to make up the difference. But what I see now troubles me even more. As the public purse is pauperized, so is self-governance. We citizens spiral downward into an ever-diminishing democracy, exercising less and less political power until it appears there's no solution but corporate charity to rescue and thus define our "failing public institutions."

Like many reversals, it happens little by little. In Toledo's hardscrabble south end, administrators affix a sign to Jones Junior High, thanking the bank that "adopted" the school. At a Chamber of Commerce breakfast, three school officials approach the head table and reach up with outstretched hands to accept their \$10,000 gifts from eminent local tax dodgers Owens-Corning Corporation, DaimlerChrysler Corporation, and other Chamber members.

Of course, when schools need more than mere handouts, they ask voters to raise taxes. With astounding audacity, the boldest corporate tax evaders then help bankroll the campaign to pass the levy—to raise taxes for everyone else!

How is it that corporate officials now decide which levies are supported and which

schools get desperately needed funds? What if DaimlerChrysler's corporate board graciously offers "free" transportation to those grade school students left without bus service? By what authority could they even make such an offer? And what do students learn at Jones Jr. High? That We the People are sovereign over schools, government, and corporations? Or that supposedly democratic institutions are in fact orphans, grateful to be adopted by generous and powerful business benefactors?

Schools around the nation are subjected to similar corporate onslaughts. One district sponsored "art contests," grade school students designing ads for soft drink and hamburger companies, with winning entries painted onto school buses. Hundreds of districts have signed chump change contracts with soft drink companies that trade student health for priceless brand loyalty. In one bizarre example of municipal fascism, a student was suspended for wearing a Pepsi Cola t-shirt on "Coca Cola Day."

For-profit corporations now run 200 schools with 100,000 students. Edison Schools, Inc. operates 79 of these, leading the effort to cash in on a \$700 billion "education industry." Edison founder Christopher Wittle introduced Channel I, a mix of cable TV news and commercials wired into thousands of schools seeking a "free" supplement for shrinking budgets in return for a guaranteed student audience for corporate programming.

The corporate assault on public education, like the corporate assault on democracy itself, has the single-mindedness of a steamroller. However, public resistance to it is building. As with other such assaults, from toxic chemicals to toxic organizations like the WTO, demands for public education must address the illegitimate power of corporations and challenge the public officials who are complicit in the usurpation of our democracy. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See “You’ve Heard of Santa Clara, Now Meet Dartmouth” in this volume. —*Ed.*

<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Susan Ohanian in *Kappan*, the journal of Phi Delta Kappa International, January 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Cleveland Plain Dealer, February 25, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> United States 1983.

<sup>5</sup> David Stratman quoted in his Keynote to Massachusetts Association of Superintendents, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> These “incentives” were given with the belief that the corporation would retain 4,900 jobs in the

Toledo area. The development agreement signed with the city in 1997 states only that employment at the company’s Toledo assembly operations is “currently anticipated to be about 4,900 Chrysler employees.” In April of 2001, DaimlerChrysler corporation announced that it would cut up to 2,035 jobs. Ralph Nader commented on this situation that the city “doesn’t have any legal remedies. [The city] is in a one-sided contract, and Chrysler has plenty of escape clauses to make sure that they couldn’t be brought to justice.” —*Ed.*