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“They Stole our Public Schools and They Stole our Democracy...”

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This past summer, four years after Hurricane Katrina, I heard two New Orleans parents make similar comments at two very different national events: “After the hurricane, they stole our public schools and they stole our democracy, all while we were out of town.”

Hearing parents define the New Orleans school transformation, with sixty percent of children now attending charter schools, as a theft of democracy has made me reflect on the public role of public education. And this reflection seems particularly poignant because removing statutory caps on the authorization of new charter schools is one of the things states need to do to qualify for innovation funds under the federal stimulus “Race to the Top” grants competition being managed by the U.S. Department of Education.

Charter schools are publicly funded, but they are private in the sense that each one reports to its own appointed board instead of a public board of education. In many states, neither individual charter boards nor Charter Management Organizations are well regulated.

Parents in New Orleans complain about the loss of democracy because forty-four different entities are currently providing education at public expense in the city. If a parent cannot find adequate services in the charter schools for an autistic or learning disabled child, that parent must enroll the child in what has become a small public district-of-last-resort or travel to Baton Rouge to try to complain to the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education or the legislature itself.

Political philosopher Benjamin Barber, in *Consumed*, a more abstract, book-long analysis of American society, reaches the same conclusion as the New Orleans parents I heard this summer: “Privatization is a kind of reverse social contract: it dissolves the bonds that tie us together into free communities

and democratic republics. It puts us back in the state of nature where we possess a natural right to get whatever we can on our own, but at the same time lose any real ability to secure that to which we have a right.”

Education writer Mike Rose, in a wonderful new book, *Why School?*, agrees: “We’ve lost hope in the public sphere and grab at private solutions, which undercut the sharing of obligation and risk and keep us scrambling for individual advantage.”

Clearly, there are many children, particularly urban and rural children, who have not been well served by their public schools. In a democracy like ours, whether the public schools can better serve all children is up to citizens. Can we, many of us living in the suburbs, find the political will adequately to fund public schools in poor communities?

And when alternatives like charters are proposed to help us Race to the Top, we need to ask ourselves as citizens whether we have a better chance of reaching the most vulnerable children through privatized management, or whether we are responsible for improving traditional public schools. Barber makes the public choice: “Inequality is built into the market system.... Inequality is not incidental to privatization, it is its very premise.”

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