

The Occupation of U.S. Public Schools: Kids as Cannon Fodder and Consumers

by Mary Beaudoin, W A M M



In November of 2009, ninety retired U.S. military leaders, including former NATO Supreme Commander General Wesley Clark, two former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and six other four-star generals and admirals, announced their plans to cultivate another demographic to fight future imperial wars—pre-schoolers. According to Rear Admiral Barnett, “Our national security in the year 2030 is absolutely dependent on what’s going on in pre-kindergarten today.”

Major press throughout the country printed the story, echoing the concern that so many 17-24 year olds are unfit for military service today and that in the future it could mean “a limited pool (of potential recruits) will hold back our military readiness and erode our national security in the long run.”

Although it may be surprising that they are targeting tots, it’s probably not surprising that high-ranking retired military men have an interest in raising cannon

fodder for the future and passing on the lethal legacy associated with their careers. But what may come as a surprise is that they are already well on their way with the aid of the Obama administration and U.S. Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan, as well as congress, in pursuing an aggressive agenda, spearheaded by the Pentagon and corporate business interests, to alter the entire U.S. public education system.

To this end, Mission Readiness promoted the Early Learning Challenge Fund. It was included in the Zero-to-Five Initiative (that's "zero to five" years of age) of President Obama's Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Request. Congress was lobbied for support state-by-state and the House of Representatives passed the initiative in the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act last September; it currently awaits passage in the Senate. The money is not for actual program. The strategy is to shift who has control of public education beginning with children in the tender years and continuing through high school.

The Early Learning Challenge Fund is only one of a number of grant programs designed to "reform" the nation's education system by militarizing and privatizing it. The so-called "education reform" movement was initiated by practitioners of a new form of private giving called "venture philanthropy," which regards public schools as free-market terrain in which to exercise its own ideologies and agendas, away from the purview of public accountability and without cumbersome educator, local community, and school board input (the "reform" movement pushes for giving city mayors, rather than school boards, oversight for schools—although it will involve itself in school board campaigns when it isn't possible).

Kenneth Saltman, Associate Professor of Social and Cultural Foundations in Education at DePaul University, stated: "Within this corporatized view of educational leadership found in venture philanthropy, military leadership is celebrated for its alleged link with corporate management—a focus on discipline, order and enforcement of mandates through a hierarchy at every level of public schooling." (Kenneth J. Saltman and David Gabbard, *Education as Enforcement: the Militarization and Corporatization of Schools*, New York: Routledge 2003.) Saltman calls the militarization of public schools with its focus on urban and predominantly African-American and Latino student bodies, "a 'profoundly racialized phenomenon'" in that "these students are framed as suffering primarily from a lack of discipline which the military and corporation can supply."

Los Angeles billionaire Eli Broad, who made a fortune through residential home building, and the insurance and financial products corporations SunAmerica and AIG, is regarded as the foremost practitioner of venture philanthropy in education reform. He created the Broad Center for the Management of School Systems to carry out its agendas—placing corporate executives and military officers who are not educators—in charge of public school administrations, and indoctrinating administrators who are already in the school system into its methods nationwide. By 2010, graduates from the Broad Superintendents Academy held 68 superintendent

positions and 88 senior school district executive positions across the country. Last year, 43 percent of all large urban school districts that conducted external searches for new superintendents filled their positions with graduates of the academy.

It isn't any wonder then that the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, which operates these programs on school reform, sees things moving in the direction it desires. Its 2009/2010 report states: "The election of President Barack Obama and his appointment of Arne Duncan, former CEO of Chicago Public Schools, as the U.S. Secretary of Education marked the pinnacle of hope for our work in education reform. In many ways, we feel the stars have finally aligned. With an agenda that echoes our decade of investments—charter schools, performance pay for teachers, accountability, expanded learning time and national standards—the Obama administration is poised to cultivate and bring to fruition the seeds we and other reformers have planted."

Military infiltration and control of public schools figure prominently in this scenario. Of the 14 members of the Broad Superintendent Class of 2010, (They keep their current jobs and attend "class" training for ten months at specific times throughout the year.) four are high-ranking military: the former Chief of Operations, NATO Afghan Operations; the Director of the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis for the United States Military Academy; the Commanding General of the United States Army Human Resources Command; and the Director of the Human Performance Resource Center for the United States Army. The class of 2009 included the Commanding General of 10th Mountain Division and Joint Task Force of 25,000 U.S. military in Afghanistan.

The education "reform" movement has so permeated our national culture that it now forms the framework of discussions about education—often in glowing terms. Both the St. Paul Pioneer Press and Minneapolis's Star Tribune referred to the selection of the new St. Paul School Superintendent for training at what they call the "prestigious" Broad Supervisor's Academy. Although the new superintendent is an educator qualified for other reasons, the Pioneer Press called her experience at the Broad school "something the School Board could hardly overlook when they were choosing candidates."

Several top officials in New York City's Department of Education were trained at the Broad program but a chemistry teacher complains, "My district can't provide working heat, light, or running water for my under-equipped lab, but we pay hundreds of thousands to the consulting businesses he (Eli Broad) promotes." She goes on to state: "The real drive behind his manipulations is the marketing plan for the useless 'services' and products provided (at public expense) for his for-profit entrepreneurial 'partners.' Edubusiness entrepreneurs hide under a layer of fake nonprofits set by 'philanthropists' like Broad and Gates." (Gotham Schools at <http://gothamschools.org>)

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is another of the most prominent venture philanthropy foundations, providing seed money for education. A Portland, Oregon parent is one of many who expresses concern in a blog about what is happening to public schools—in this case, public pre-school. He complains that “my four year old can now color a rooster on the computer. Great skills for the future! It would be much cheaper to color a rooster with crayons on paper, but that wouldn’t benefit the tech companies pocketbook...” Horatio Guernica (pen name of a West Coast writer) stated in *As It Ought to Be: Public Education* July 2009 that current Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, a former board member of the Eli Broad Foundation, and the education reformers he represents “are frothing at the mouth to privatize one of our last remaining public assets, public schools...”

According to reports in *Detroit News* from October 2009 through January 2010, in the Detroit Public School District controversy swirls around extremely lucrative contracts for consultants, possible conflicts of interest with record-breaking deals for web-based teaching products and student achievement measurement. Detroit Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb is a graduate of the Broad Superintendent’s School and embroiled in a lawsuit with the school board over who has control of academics.

Throughout the country, much evidence points to a coup d’etat of public schools. The Pentagon absorbs a monstrous amount of taxpayers’ money. Sanctions are put in place—struggling schools are unable to get the resources they need, with the most vulnerable paying the heaviest price and often forced to close. Hence, the school district is “softened up.” Using the corporate media, a propaganda campaign is conducted to convince the public that schools (especially urban ones) are failing and that educators and the local community are inadequate to handle the problem—though privatized charter school enterprises and the military can, making use of public money but without public accountability.

U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan held the title “CEO” of Chicago Public Schools and presided over the most militarized school district in the United States. Andy Kroll reported in *Mother Jones*, August 30, 2009, that “nearly 10,500” of Chicago’s “sixth through twelfth graders participate in some kind of military program on campus. Today, Chicago has six military high schools run by a branch of the armed services. Six smaller military academies share buildings within existing high schools.”

Chicago teacher Betsy Schnitzer wrote that Obama’s choice for Secretary of Education “union-busting, school-privatizing, school-militarizing Arne Duncan” is an indication of “the corporate and military friendly agenda of Barack Obama.” (“Obama’s Privatizing Agenda for Education?” January 26, 2009). Like many others, she describes a situation in which teachers are fired and replaced with young, non-union teachers; a small handful of elite, token schools are rewarded and those in most need are “characterized as failures” and cut adrift—some turned over to direct military control.

The National School Board's daily web blog, BoardBuzz, reported on January 28, 2010, hearing from the Department of Education that there will be resources to "improve underperforming schools and a big push for prekindergarten" among other things, but said, "What concerns BoardBuzz is the discussion of a shift from discretionary funds to competitive grants..."

To make schools and educators compete for grants is not a sustainable model and sets up a scenario to divide them into winners and losers—reflecting the competitive philosophy of free-market capitalism and victor versus vanquished tactic of the military—one that from all accounts is moving ahead all over the country, from one end to the other.

The Washington Post, January 29, 2010, reported U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan saying, "this is a tough thing to say, but let me be really honest. I think the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina." In its out-of-touch ignorance and callousness, the remark recalls Barbara Bush's comment about how the suffering people of New Orleans were better off in the Super Dome than they had been before the levees broke. More importantly, it is the trademark of disaster capitalism as described by economist Naomi Klein, in which privatization moves in to profit when a geographic region finds itself in vulnerable circumstances.

Educators, teachers' unions, school boards, parents, grandparents, communities, civic watchdogs, counter-recruitment activists and anyone concerned about children, militarization and privatization will need to be vigilant, vocal and active in the days ahead to prevent more of the public school system from being dismantled and put in the hands of oligarchs and the military forces who have strategically targeted public schools and children to exploit as consumers and cannon fodder. Recent successful efforts in Los Angeles can inspire them. This February educators, parents, students and the teachers' union mounted a vigorous grassroots campaign to take back schools from outside reformers. As a result, the Los Angeles School Board voted against charter take-overs and turned 22 out of 30 challenged schools over to teacher control.

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