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# Democracy & Education

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## The Privatization Movement Is not Dead!

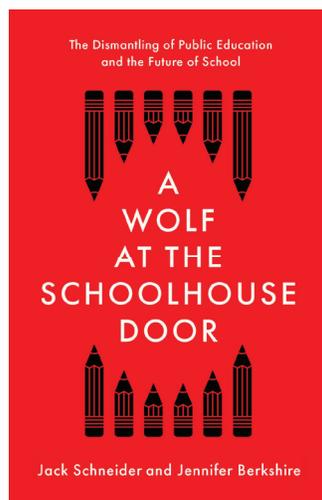
### A Book Review of *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door: The Dismantling of Public Education and the Future of School*

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**I**N JANUARY 2020, Diane Ravitch published *Slaying Goliath*, her third book criticizing the movement to privatize America's public schools—a movement she helped to create. Ravitch takes aim at what she calls the “Disruptors,” the politicians and their billionaire financiers who seek to inject competition into schooling, break teacher unions, and undermine community-owned and community-run public schools. Ravitch outlines the decades-long strategy enacted by devotees of Milton Friedman's quasi-religious belief that market-based competition always creates the best form of social organization and that school privatization will remove the “inefficiencies” in public education (e.g., expensive teacher salaries) and inject innovation in curriculum and instruction.

As an answer to this “Disruption movement,” reminiscent of a plot line of *Star Wars*, Ravitch (2020) introduces what she calls “the Resistance.” “The Resistance” is a grassroots effort made up of parents, teachers, and community organizers who recognize the value of community-owned public schooling and work to defend it. Ravitch points to case after case in which the policies promoting privatized education (e.g., No Child Left Behind, Value Added Measures, Charter School Vouchers, Race to the Top) have failed to increase “student achievement” on standardized measures of performance and how the “the Resistance” has fought back efforts to cut school budgets, increase class sizes, reduce teacher salaries, and subvert the power of unions. The inspirational stories of “David” beating “Goliath” lead Ravitch to proclaim, the



“Disruption movement is dying” (p. 9) and the “Resistance is winning the war” (p. 53).

However, despite her optimism, Ravitch (2020) gives a warning: “I read about a man who decapitated a rattlesnake in his backyard; he waited ten minutes, then picked up the detached head, and it bit him, nearly killing him. The snake was dead, but it still had poisonous venom and still was capable of grievous harm. That is like the Disruptors today” (p. 9).

Fast-forward six months—in the midst of a global pandemic and a social justice movement sparked by the murder of George Floyd—then President Donald Trump asserted on June 16, 2020, that “the civil rights statement of the year, of the decade, and probably beyond” was his full-throated policy commitment to “school choice”—code for the privatization of America's community-owned public schools. Then, two weeks later, in a ruling unrelated to Trump's statement, the Supreme Court of the United States announced their decision in *Espinoza v. Montana*, striking 38 states' constitutional provisions that bar public monies from going to religious schools (Totenberg & Naylor, 2020).

With Trump, and his administration, including his secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, voted out of office in November

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and Joe Biden having signaled renewed support for public education and a desire to reign in the expansion of for-profit charter schools (Blad, 2020), advocates for public education are justified in their hope that federal policy regarding school privatization will change. However, Friedman's secular faith in market competition (with opportunity for private profit) is still very much alive in this country, and the Biden administration is tasked with balancing a coalition of constituencies that hold mixed opinions on the value of charter schools (Blad, 2020). That, together with a 6–3 conservative majority now sitting on the Supreme Court and the Republican party retaining control over the majority of state governments after the 2020 election (Lieb, 2020), many of which have pushed forward their privatization agenda during the COVID-19 crisis (Mulvihill, 2021; Strauss, 2021), it seems foolish to assume the drive to privatize America's public education system is finished. The "Disruption movement" is not dead!

Enter education historian Jack Schneider and journalist Jennifer Berkshire, cohosts of the podcast *Have You Heard* and authors of *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door* (The New World Press). If the movement to privatize education is in fact "dying," Schneider and Berkshire stand guard against its revitalization. Schneider and Berkshire take on a history that is familiar to those who have read other works tracing efforts to privatize schooling in America; however, unlike Ravitch's (2020) optimistic forecast, Schneider and Berkshire "sound an alarm," calling for the public's sustained attention to the snake's unsuspected bite—or to use their metaphor, a wolf "waiting for the pack to assemble" (Schneider & Berkshire, 2020, p. xxi). Those who look to privatize schooling are "prowling, biding time," playing the long game, as they use their billions of dollars to besiege a system supported by a strong, but fragmented, variable, and voluntary grassroots effort (Schneider & Berkshire, 2020, p. xxi). According to Schneider and Berkshire, without continued vigilance and sustained efforts to beat school privatization, supporters of that cause will win in their attempt to dismantle America's public schools.

Schneider and Berkshire (2020) argue that defenders of public education need three conceptual frames to fight privatization efforts, and the book is organized accordingly. The first conceptual frame is an understanding of the aims and objectives of the movement, which the authors articulate in the first four chapters, the first part of their argument. Chapter 1 examines the libertarian values that position individual freedom above collective prosperity, a position that suspects public institutions of corrupting children away from capitalist ideals and/or religious principles. Chapter 2 looks at privatizers' belief in unregulated capitalist markets, an unquestioning faith that the "invisible hand" is best for guiding education policy. Chapter 3 follows privatizers' desires to cut costs and reduce budgets, demands often associated with teacher contracts, class size and special education. And Chapter 4 looks at the war against workers and teacher unions, the desire to break the power of organized labor. Together, these aims and objectives frame the work of public schools as suspect, and they frighten parents into believing that privatization is the better choice for their children (p. 17).

Today, the overwhelming majority of Americans strongly support their local public schools, but Schneider and Berkshire (2020) show how privatizers plot to get their policy proposals past scrutiny—this is part two of their argument. Those who wish to privatize America's education system have repeatedly rebranded their product to disguise the underlying intention. Starting in 1955, the year after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, privatizers, especially in the South, began calling for "vouchers," "education savings accounts," "tuition tax credits," "charters," and "school choice," all with the aim of diverting public tax dollars away from efforts to desegregate schools (p. 18), but the ideology of privatization did not infiltrate the federal government until the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, who, under the guidance of Milton Friedman, reframed the philosophy as a "free-market" approach to education (p. 20). The authors examine a range of privatization policies that have worked to this rebranded end, including political maneuvering in Florida and Arizona to allocate public monies to religious schools, in some cases exposing children to extremist and ultraconservative curricula at tax payers' expense (Chapter 5), the undisguised lust for profits pursued by "edupreneurs" (Chapter 6), the turn to online instruction as an effort to cut costs (chapter 7), and the concerted attempts by powerful elites like DeVos to end regulations that hamper the growth of the private school industry (Chapter 8).

Like Ravitch, Schneider and Berkshire address the failings of the privatization philosophy, providing numerous examples of how privatizers have failed. They point to fallacies in the narrative of efficiency, they point to discriminatory practices and outright racism inherent in many privatized schools, they trace the pattern of corruption and waste that is synonymous with both for-profit and non-profit charter schools, they illustrate how these schools manipulate students and their data, and they show an unmistakable pattern of discrimination toward students identified with disabilities, children of color, and children living in poverty. However, they're wary of the claim that school privatization is on the wane and finish their argument with four chapters that paint an alarming future for education in America.

The third part of Schneider and Berkshire's (2020) argument outlines a grim picture of what American education will entail if privatizers win this battle. The portrait includes schools functioning based on user reviews and the whims of the market, not democratic deliberation and compromise involving parents, community members, and educational professionals (Chapter 9). The portrait includes significant taxpayer dollars spent on marketing, as individual schools vie for scarce resources tied to student enrollments (Chapter 10), and a teaching profession beholden to a "gig economy" where individual, at-will teachers subcontract their work for decreased pay, minimal benefits, and zero job security (Chapter 11). Perhaps most startling, this future includes a curriculum geared primarily to fulfilling the labor needs of corporate elites while local control and democratic governance is usurped (Chapter 12).

The authors conclude the book highlighting the role of racism in the philosophy of privatization. Schneider and Berkshire point out that legislative support for school privatization has only led to

an increase in school segregation, and they reference this undercurrent of racist ideology throughout the book; however, leaving the bulk of this analysis to the conclusion inadequately addresses the role white supremacy plays as the undergirding of the privatization movement. Commenting on Trump’s “civil rights statement of the year,” Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, tweeted, “It’s worth noting that school vouchers grew out of segregation. So yeah, it’s a civil rights issue, but not in the way he thinks” (Whistle, 2020). It should not go understated that private school vouchers first appeared in Southern states in the years following *Brown v. Board* (1954) as a legislative attempt to resist desegregation, and the privatization movement today retains this legacy of undermining efforts to create a more integrated, meritocratic, and just society (Frenkiewicz & Onosko, 2020). Just as billionaires try to hide their dark money influence behind thinly veiled “grassroots” organizations, the ideology of white supremacy hides behind a veil of libertarian talking points and the rhetoric of “school choice.” While *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door* is a valuable addition to the discourse defending public education, concerned readers must turn to other works that further address the racism embedded (either hidden or exposed) in attempts to privatize schools. Works from authors such as Jonathan Kozol (2005) and Noliwe Rooks (2017) should be required reading if we wish to fully take on this history and stay vigilant against the move to privatize and further racialize American education.

*A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door* provides valuable ammunition to those fighting for America’s public schools—a war that has seen grassroots efforts defeat a billion-dollar juggernaut on several occasions, but a war that is far from over. Ravitch may be correct that the privatization movement is dying, but many people with vast resources stand ready to resuscitate it. Schneider and Berkshire (2020) state that the intention of their book is to “scare people” into continued vigilance (p. 208). Job done.

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