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# Democracy & Education

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## Conservatives' Use of a Civil Rights Narrative Helped Them Secure Control of American Education Policy.

A Book Review of *The Death of Public School: How Conservatives Won the War Over Education in America*

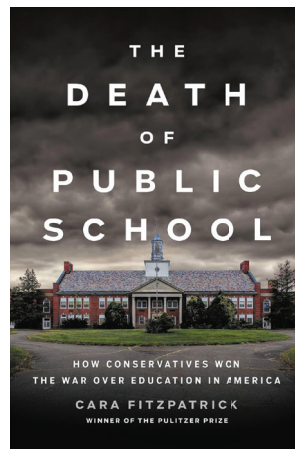
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**I**N *THE DEATH OF PUBLIC SCHOOL*, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Cara Fitzpatrick traces the history of America's move to privatize its education system, a turn that threatens to transform the nation's schools from a public good into a private commodity.

Fitzpatrick (2023) begins her 23-chapter history where any accounting of the school privatization movement should begin, white supremacists' attempts to keep schools segregated after the Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (Chapters 1–3). The *Brown* decision opened a beachhead in the fight for racial justice, and segregationists such as Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, Virginia Senator Harry Byrd Sr., South Carolina Governor Donald Russell, and Alabama Governor George Wallace did their best to thwart any attempts to repair the damage caused by centuries of racist policy. Within four years of the *Brown* decision, at least seven states in the South passed laws intended to prevent the desegregation of schools (p. 24), and five states created private school tuition grant programs or school vouchers targeted at white families hoping to remove their children from the public school system—policy intended to starve public schools serving children of color and keep American society divided. By 1969, at least 17 states had active campaigns aiming to expand state aid to private schools (p. 72).

The author then shows how this root motivation was eclipsed by other interests, in some cases unrelated and with contrary aims, to shift the narrative concerning school privatization. In the second half of the 20th century, legislation that would use public monies to



fund vouchers was sponsored and supported not only by “white segregationists in the South looking to skirt *Brown*” but also by Catholics, “who viewed their schools as providing a public service, by some Black and Latino parents searching for an escape from troubled urban school systems, and by conservatives who wanted to disrupt and possibly destroy America’s public school system” (Fitzpatrick, 2023, p. 247). These various interest groups created a synergy that worked to advance their

differing aims for school policy, and their efforts were so successful that by the turn of the 21st century, advocates for school vouchers (e.g., Chapters 4 and 5), school choice (e.g., Chapters 6–9), and charter schools (e.g., Chapters 10–12) were able to pass certain aspects of their agendas into law with bipartisan support (Fitzpatrick, 2023, p. 142). Despite more and more evidence showing how school choice programs were increasing segregation across the nation (Rotberg, 2014), by 2009, Democratic President Barack Obama made charter schools an integral feature of his signature Race to the Top grant program (Fitzpatrick, 2023, p. 286).

However, the election of Donald Trump, and his appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education, marked the end of the eclipse, prompting many Americans to again recognize the

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conservative nature of the school privatization movement (Fitzpatrick, 2023, p. 296). By 2016, education policies that once had bipartisan support were now distinctly in the purview of the Republican Party, and despite many Democrats turning their backs on school privatization policy, the die was cast, and the movement seemed impossible to stop (Fitzpatrick, 2023, p. 296). Conservatives had taken control of the nation's education policy agenda—they had won the war over education in America.

So, how did this happen? How were conservatives able to cement a policy that began as a white supremacist plot to subvert desegregation? For the answer to this question, Fitzpatrick (2023) points to conservatives' use of a multifaceted civil rights narrative created by the many interest groups who took on school privatization efforts. This narrative combined appeals for religious, racial, and economic freedoms, and it successfully hid the original white supremacist power, allowing the more conservative elements in the movement to pursue their own ends while the movement remained disguised as a bipartisan effort.

Fitzpatrick (2023) traces the first development in this narrative to the publication of Friedman's 1955 essay "The Role of Government in Education" (p. 21). With public sentiment moving against segregationist policy after the 1954 *Brown* decision, white supremacists needed another avenue to argue for their goal of government funded vouchers; with federal civil rights legislation of the 1960s derailing their original plot to privatize American schools, Friedman's argument that the American people should fund education, but not run the schools, was the perfect vehicle for continuing these efforts (p. 21).

Friedman claimed he did not know his idea for education vouchers was in sync with segregationist plans already in existence, and he tried to distance himself from them with a footnote in his essay, but as Fitzpatrick (2023) states, Friedman's position "seemed either naïve or willfully ignorant of the racial oppression in the South" (p. 23). Regardless of any known association, Friedman's philosophy became an embedded plank in conservative platforms working to shift funds and control away from community schools, and Friedman himself became a vocal policy advisor for a Reagan administration looking to undermine democratically governed and publicly funded institutions like American's schools. Today, Friedman's philosophy remains a foundational argument in the privatization movement, and it is the glue that binds the various conservative interests together in their common pursuit of school privatization.

Fitzpatrick (2023) also details how segregationists searched for and found allies among Catholics looking for state support for parochial schools. Leon Dure, a retired newspaper editor who believed "white people had the right not to associate with Black people in publicly financed settings, such as public schools" (p. 49), for example, connected with Rev. Virgil Blum, who sought public financing for Catholic schools. Dure sought freedom of association (i.e., segregation), and Blum argued for freedom of religion, but in Dure's words, "All our First Amendment freedoms are just facets of the same jewel" (p. 54). Here, together with Friedman's argument for economic freedom, is the birth of the multifaceted civil rights narrative conservatives would use to pursue their goals of school

privatization, and as white supremacists lost esteem in American society, they justified their cause through Friedman's doctrine of economic freedom or Blum's doctrine of religious freedom.

The most powerful facet of this civil rights narrative came from Black and Latino parents looking to escape underfunded schools in America's cities. For this part of the history, Fitzpatrick (2023) tells the story of Milwaukee's Democratic state representative Annette "Polly" Williams, and her alliance with Wisconsin's Republican governor, Tommy Thompson. In her search for a way to address Black disenfranchisement in local school governance, and the chronic problems of low academic achievement and school dropout among the city's Black youth, Williams, and her ally Howard Fuller, argued to Thompson that Black residents in Milwaukee should be given the money and power to control where their children attend school (p. 98).

Fitzpatrick (2023) shows how Williams and Thompson were able to flip the narrative on school vouchers to frame them not as a vehicle for segregation but rather as a means for expanding civil rights, with anyone in opposition framed as racist (Chapters 6–9). To the point, in June 1990, as the debate regarding school vouchers took center stage in Wisconsin politics, and vouchers looked to break out as a national issue, the *Wall Street Journal* published an editorial comparing Bert Grover, Wisconsin's superintendent of schools and a vocal opponent of vouchers, to Southern segregationists, "blocking the schoolhouse doors" against Black children trying to enter Milwaukee schools (p. 124).

Fitzpatrick (2023) spends the second half of the book showing how Republicans and Democrats then used this multifaceted civil rights narrative, specifically the argument regarding racial justice, not only to push vouchers, which were still largely unpopular by the close of the 1980s, but also to promote charter schools, which provided privatization advocates a more popular avenue for pursuing their agenda (Chapters 10–12). She provides case studies for how privatization efforts played out in cities like Cleveland, Ohio (Chapter 13), and New Orleans, Louisiana (Chapters 21 and 22), on the state level in places like Florida (Chapter 17), and at the federal level in Congress (Chapters 16, 18, and 22), and at the Supreme Court (Chapters 14, 19, and 20).

Fitzpatrick (2023) begins the conclusion of her monograph with an obituary to Polly Williams, who passed away in 2014 at the age of 77 (p. 288). Fitzpatrick argues that, "without her, the country's first modern school voucher program would not exist. Without it, charter schools would not have taken off across the country as a more politically palatable alternative" (p. 290). However, by the time of her retirement in 2010, conservative appropriation of the civil rights narrative she helped create had forced Williams to the margins as they took control of the movement and steered it in their own direction (p. 285). DeVos would credit Williams as the "mother of our movement" (p. 298), but the policies that conservatives pursued in the 21st century in many ways disregarded Williams's original intentions (p. 285). As Williams said in 2011, "It was never supposed to get this big" (p. 284).

In her telling the story of Williams, and the larger story of school privatization in America, Fitzpatrick (2023) provides the

reader with plenty to consider when it comes to how best to understand this history. The author uses a journalistic lens to tell a detailed story of school privatization, but in some cases, Fitzpatrick's work leaves the reader wanting a more critical framework for interrogating how the intersections of race, class, and politics affect this history. For example, Fitzpatrick's statement that "Polly was useful to the school choice movement because of her race and her party affiliation" (p. 285) deserves scrutiny. Fitzpatrick reminds the reader that the success of school privatization efforts today is the "shared legacy of other choice advocates like Milton Friedman, Virgil Blum, Christopher Jencks, and Ted Kilderie" (p. 290)—most importantly, the white supremacists who planted the seeds of the movement; however, to frame Williams, a Black woman with incredible political accomplishments and credentials, as "useful to the school choice movement" demeans her agency in pursuing and achieving her vision for education. Use of a critical theoretical framework would reveal more nuances in this story than what Fitzpatrick's telling provides.

Fitzpatrick (2023) ends her book with a summary of DeVos's 2019 "back-to-school tour," an appropriate coda to this story but also one that will leave readers looking for more. DeVos skillfully employed the civil rights narrative to advance a conservative education agenda—remember Trump's 2017 State of the Union Address, in which he called his administration's push for "school choice" "the civil rights issue of our time" (Klein & Ujifusa, 2017); however, Fitzpatrick (2023) only devotes six pages to a discussion of the Trump administration's efforts to privatize schools, leaving out mention of his 2017 speech. More analysis of these efforts would have been helpful, as the Trump administration marks the end of bipartisan privatization efforts.

Fitzpatrick (2023) also misses the opportunity to follow up on the influence of religious conservatives in shaping recent privatization efforts. Today, this interest group is arguably the most powerful influence in shaping conservative education policy (Stewart, 2020), and singling out Catholics and their pursuit of funding for parochial schools does not give adequate attention to other religious groups working toward their own ends. However, despite lacking her trademark detail in this final chapter, Fitzpatrick is successful in telling the story of how America got to a place where an openly racist conservative politician with ties to white Christian nationalism could unabashedly call his efforts to dismantle the nation's public

education system and increase segregation in our schools "the civil rights issue of our time."

Fitzpatrick's (2023) work is also important as it brings forward a framework for understanding the privatization movement that is often missing in other histories of this subject. While others have outlined and explained the multiple motivations behind the school privatization movement (e.g., Frenkiewich & Onosko, 2021), the detail with which Fitzpatrick tells this history is noteworthy, and while much scholarly attention in recent years has been focused on the business interests behind school privatization efforts (e.g., Ravitch, 2020; Tell, 2021), certainly a powerful influence, it is important to recognize that any work that understands privatization efforts as coming from a single interest group, or a single power structure, oversimplifies the issue and leaves readers without an adequate background. Fitzpatrick's work forces the reader to acknowledge the complicated history behind this movement, and she opens a window to understanding how the power of white nationalism hid in the privatization movement for more than 50 years, allowing conservative forces to gain control of an important aspect of American education policy today.

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