

## **Editorial: Goodbye to Schools as Businesses Spring 2009**

### **By the Editors of Rethinking Schools**

Since the early 20th century, prominent business leaders have acted on the belief that since they were good at making money, they were obviously the most qualified people to decide how to best educate the country's young. Entranced by the power and efficiency of American industry, many educational leaders looked to these businessmen for leadership and also looked to the business world generally to find defining purposes and models of operation. They tried to govern school systems as if they were corporations, organize schools as if they were something akin to factories, and orient education toward testing and tracking students toward presumed "real world" destinies.

The predominant impact of corporate influence is still with us—consider that prior to his appointment as President Obama's Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan was not the "Superintendent" of the Chicago Public Schools, but its CEO—Chief Executive Officer. Or consider the countless prestigious blue ribbon task forces on which corporate officials are more prominently represented than rank-and-file teachers, parents, or, say, community organizers.

But in recent years the theme of factory-like efficiency that captivated business and educational leaders alike has been largely supplanted by another theme: the magical capacity of unrestrained market incentives to solve educational problems. Thus the emphasis on consumer choice among schools through vouchers or charters or plans to pay teachers based on test score improvements.

There are many flaws inherent in imagining that schools will work well once they adopt factory or free market models. Perhaps most fundamental is the presumption that schools work best when they emulate business. Schools are not businesses. When they flourish, they are living communities defined by powerful and caring collaboration. Students are not things to be produced—they are human beings who are learning and growing in ways that are too complex, erratic, or nuanced for any standardized scores to truly measure. And teacher dedication is better nourished by a supportive and successful work culture than by narrow appeals to individual self-interest.

The purposes of schooling should not be degraded into privatized preparation toward the fattest paycheck. Clearly, schools should prepare students to earn decent livelihoods. But just as importantly, they should prepare students to look toward and even demand that the jobs they will find as adults should be a major source of fulfillment and creative expression. And schools should go far beyond preparing students for work. There are many non-market (perhaps even anti-market) purposes for learning: to end wars, to effect racial equality, to curb greenhouse gases, to halt domestic violence, to appreciate the arts, to play sports and exercise, ... to learn to live together.

We have to remember, education is education—a humane and human process. It is not competition or production. It is not a business, and business leaders really don't know much about it. Education is not their area of expertise.

Indeed, now that casino capitalism has imploded—and recently, the economy is hemorrhaging jobs at the rate of 20,000 a day— isn't it time to stop looking to the corporate elite for advice on how to run the schools? These "experts"—the bankers and corporate CEOs—reveal little expertise even at that one thing they are supposed to be good at: running their own businesses and keeping the economy afloat.

As educators, we need to shed our subordinate status and sense of inferiority. We should assert that schools work best when educators—in dialogue with parents and other citizens—are recognized as far more competent to design educational experiences than corporate officials. As the poet and activist June Jordan wrote almost 30 years ago (in a phrase borrowed by the Obama campaign): We are the ones we have been waiting for.