

Experts say marketplace mentality toward schools hurts society

January 28, 2021

Society suffers when education is viewed as a commodity rather than as a common good, two public education advocates told participants in a teleconference sponsored by [Pastors for Texas Children](#).

Journalist Jennifer Berkshire and education historian Jack Schneider,  co-authors of [A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door: The Dismantling of Public Education and the Future of School](#) and co-hosts of the “[Have You Heard](#)” podcast, addressed ministers and other advocates for public schools during a [Zoom teleconference](#) Jan. 27.

When citizens view education only in terms of their own self-interest rather than in light of shared interests, that leads to “the further atomization of American society” and “fragmentation of communities,” Schneider said.

A market that encourages individuals to make decisions about education based only on personal interests creates no incentive to seek common ground or promote the common good, he said.

“When we are appealed to as consumers, we operate differently than when we are appealed to as citizens,” Schneider said.

When the marketplace mentality toward education becomes government policy, it puts parents in the position of shoppers who are targeted by slick, expensive advertisers who “promise the moon,” Berkshire asserted.

“You can imagine a system in which we advertise educational products to

people like we advertise pharmaceuticals—the difference being, of course, that pharmaceuticals are regulated,” she said, but there is no required “fine print” in the education ads.

“You can see how parents—vulnerable parents who are now untethered from any institution—are kind of sitting ducks,” she added.

Bipartisan blame for marketplace mentality

Republicans who support vouchers for private schools and Democrats who promote charter schools share the blame for fostering a marketplace mentality toward education, said Cameron Vickrey, associate director of Pastors for Texas Children—an assertion the two authors echoed.

✘ “Charters are a slippery slope” toward the privatization of education, Schneider asserted. “It’s hard to just stop there, because they introduce a new kind of mindset for people and a new kind of rhetoric—a new worldview that you are a consumer; you are a shopper.”

Charter schools also create “a beachhead for other forms of privatization,” he said. Charters particularly appealed to centrist Democrats and mainstream Republicans during the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations.

“But, of course, once Betsy DeVos assumed office [as U.S. Secretary of Education], they had laid a very lovely runway that allowed for her to try to land the voucher airplane,” Schneider said.

The [Texas Public Charter Schools Association](#) asserts high-quality charter schools “serve an essential purpose in public education, offering a variety of educational models and achieving impressive outcomes for more than 300,000 students in Texas, including some of the state’s most underserved

students.”

The association states its mission is to “protect the Texas charter school community’s ability to grow and innovate free from red tape that would make it harder for schools to educate students according to their missions.”

‘Not what many people think’

Charter schools purport to enhance innovation by stripping away bureaucracy and unnecessary regulation, but those goals could be achieved within existing public school systems, Schneider asserted.

“Charters are not a pedagogy. They’re not a way of teaching. They’re not resources. It’s not like charter schools are suddenly bringing everything to the table that our community schools might lack,” he said.

“Charters aren’t what many people think they are. They’re just an opportunity to gain some flexibility in an existing system that could already have that flexibility baked into it. I think it should.”

Berkshire and Schneider acknowledged the potential positive aspects of charter schools in some situations. They noted some areas where a “charter school of instrumentality” is incorporated into a public school system specifically to meet a need existing community schools were unable to meet. For instance, a charter school may be created to provide a “diverse by design” learning environment where neighborhoods are not racially diverse.

Find other ways to measure success

Turning to the subject of high-stakes standardized tests, Schneider noted many ways schools “game the system” by denying admission to some students, teaching to the test and narrowing the curriculum.

“The key phrase here is ‘high-stakes tests.’ If we get rid of the stakes, we get rid of most of the negative unintended consequences,” he said.

Other metrics and measures can be used to evaluate educational outcomes beyond the narrow scope of a standardized test, Schneider noted.

“You also want to measure the other things you care about,” he said. “How engaged are kids? How happy are they? What are their relationships with their teachers like? How safe do they feel? Are they getting art and music? Is there a chance to play? Is there an opportunity for creativity? How are they developing as citizens?”

The emphasis on high-stakes standardized tests in public schools  actually has benefited private schools that market themselves to parents who don’t want their children experiencing that kind of pressure, Berkshire added.

She urged the faith community to advance a holistic view of addressing “learning loss” students have experienced during the pandemic.

Rather than looking only at “narrowing the gap” in math and reading test scores, pastors and other congregational leaders can advocate for a broader understanding of public education, she suggested.

Pastors for Texas Children’s 2021 [legislative priorities](#) include calling on lawmakers to “find new measures of meaningful assessment and pause state accountability and punitive testing.” The group’s legislative agenda also includes opposition to the expansion of charter schools and a call for existing charter schools to be held to the same standards as public schools.

Halt grants to charter schools

Five days prior to the teleconference, Pastors for Texas Children Executive Director Charles Foster Johnson wrote a [letter](#) to the Department of

Education advocating against further grants for charter schools.



Charles Foster Johnson, executive director of Pastors for Texas Children, makes a point during a gathering at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary. (File Photo / Robert Rogers / Baylor University)

Charter schools drain public funds from community schools that serve all students while enacting policies and following practices that do not make educational opportunities broadly available, he asserted.

"In Texas, charter schools are allowed to exclude any student with a discipline history from enrollment in the charter, which research has shown discriminates specifically against children of color and students with special needs who have disproportionate percentages of discipline issues," Johnson wrote.

"In addition, existing charter schools in Texas are allowed to expand through a simple administrative process without any notice to the general public, any public hearing, and without posting the expansion requests on any public website. The only way some neighborhoods have become aware a charter plans to open a new campus is when construction starts."

Johnson pointed to documentation showing charter schools have been allowed to expand even though they serve only 2.1 percent of students with special needs—well below the state average of 10.5 percent.

"Clearly, charters that significantly underserve students with special needs should not be rewarded by allowing them to expand, and in fact, the

department should investigate the practices of such charters,” he wrote.

“I ask that the department take a pause in funding the expansion of charter schools through this program until there is a review of practices and policies such as these that raise serious issues about education equity for our most vulnerable children and practices that ensure authentic public participation. We need to reset what the priorities of federal funding should be based on shared community values, actual outcomes and hard data.”