

The DeVos Family: Meet the Super-Wealthy Right-Wingers Working With the Religious Right to Kill Public Education

By Rachel Tabachnick, AlterNet

Posted on May 6, 2011, Printed on May 13, 2011

http://www.alternet.org/story/150868/the_devos_family%3A_meet_the_super-wealthy_right-wingers_working_with_the_religious_right_to_kill_public_education

Since the 2010 elections, voucher bills have popped up in legislatures around the nation. From Pennsylvania to Indiana to Florida, state governments across the country have introduced bills that would take money from public schools and use it to send students to private and religious institutions.

Vouchers have always been a staple of the right-wing agenda. Like previous efforts, this most recent push for vouchers is led by a network of conservative think tanks, PACs, Religious Right groups and wealthy conservative donors. But "school choice," as they euphemistically paint vouchers, is merely a means to an end. Their ultimate goal is the total elimination of our public education system.

The decades-long campaign to end public education is propelled by the super-wealthy, right-wing DeVos family. Betsy Prince DeVos is the sister of Erik Prince, founder of the notorious private military contractor Blackwater USA (now Xe), and wife of Dick DeVos, son of the co-founder of Amway, the multi-tiered home products business.

By now, you've surely heard of the Koch brothers, whose behind-the-scenes financing of right-wing causes has been widely documented in the past year. The DeVoses have remained largely under the radar, despite the fact that their stealth assault on America's schools has the potential to do away with public education as we know it.

Right-Wing Privatization Forces

The conservative policy institutes founded beginning in the 1970s get [hundreds of millions](#) of dollars from wealthy families and foundations to develop and promote free market fundamentalism. More specifically, their goals include privatizing social security, reducing government regulations, thwarting environmental policy, [dismantling unions](#) -- and eliminating public schools.

Whatever they may say about giving poor students a leg up, their real priority is nothing short of the total dismantling of our public educational institutions, and they've admitted as much. Cato Institute founder Ed Crane and other conservative think tank leaders have signed the [Public Proclamation to Separate School and State](#), which reads in part that signing on, "Announces to the world your commitment to end involvement by local, state, and federal government from education."

But Americans don't want their schools dismantled. So privatization advocates have recognized that it's not politically viable to openly push for full privatization and have resigned themselves to

incrementally dismantling public school systems. The think tanks' weapon of choice is school vouchers.

Vouchers are funded with public school dollars but are used to pay for students to attend private and parochial (religious-affiliated) schools. The idea was introduced in the 1950s by the high priest of free-market fundamentalism, Milton Friedman, who also made the real goal of the voucher movement clear: "Vouchers are not an end in themselves; they are a means to make a transition from a government to a free-market system." The quote is in a 1995 Cato Institute briefing paper titled "Public Schools: Make Them Private."

Joseph Bast, president of Heartland Institute, stated in 1997, "Like most other conservatives and libertarians, we see vouchers as a major step toward the complete privatization of schooling. In fact, after careful study, we have come to the conclusion that they are the only way to dismantle the current socialist regime." Bast added, "Government schools will diminish in enrollment and thus in number as parents shift their loyalty and vouchers to superior-performing private schools."

But Bast's lofty goals have not panned out. That's because, quite simply, voucher programs do not work.

The longest running voucher program in the country is the 20-year-old Milwaukee School Choice Program. Standardized testing shows that the voucher students in private schools perform below the level of Milwaukee's public school students, and even when socioeconomic status is factored in, the [voucher students](#) still score at or below the level of the students who remain in Milwaukee's public schools. Cleveland's voucher program [has produced](#) similar results. Private schools in the voucher program range from excellent to very poor. In some, less than 20 percent of students reach basic proficiency levels in math and reading.

Most Americans do not want their tax dollars to fund private and sectarian schools. Since 1966, [24 of 25 voucher initiatives](#) have been defeated by voters, most by huge margins. Nevertheless, the pro-privatization battle continues, organized by an array of 527s, 501(c)(3)s, 501(c)(4)s, and political action committees. At the helm of this interconnected network is [Betsy DeVos](#), the four-star general of the pro-voucher movement.

The DeVos Family Campaign for Privatization of Schools

The DeVoses are top contributors to the Republican Party and have provided the funding for major Religious Right organizations. And they spent millions of their own fortune promoting the failed voucher initiative in Michigan in 2000, dramatically outspending their opposition. Sixty-eight percent of Michigan voters rejected the voucher scheme. Following this defeat, the DeVoses altered their strategy.

Instead of taking the issue directly to voters, they would support bills for vouchers in state legislatures. In 2002 Dick DeVos gave [a speech on school choice](#) at the Heritage Foundation. After an introduction by former Reagan Secretary of Education William Bennett, DeVos described a system of "rewards and consequences" to pressure state politicians to support vouchers. "That has got to be the battle. It will

not be as visible,” stated DeVos. He described how his wife Betsy was putting these ideas into practice in their home state of Michigan and claimed this effort has reduced the number of anti-school choice Republicans from six to two. The millions raised from the wealthy pro-privatization contributors would be used to finance campaigns of voucher supporters and purchase ads attacking opposing candidates.

[Media materials](#) for Betsy DeVos’ group All Children Matter, formed in 2003, claimed the organization spent \$7.6 million in its first year, “impacting state legislative elections in 10 targeted states” and a won/loss record of 121/60.

Dick DeVos also explained to his Heritage Foundation audience that they should no longer use the term public schools, but instead start calling them “government schools.” He noted that the role of wealthy conservatives would have to be obscured. “We need to be cautious about talking too much about these activities,” said DeVos, and pointed to the need to “cut across a lot of historic boundaries, be they partisan, ethnic, or otherwise.”

Reinventing Vouchers

Like DeVos, several free-market think tanks have also issued warnings that vouchers appear to be an “elitist” plan. There’s reason for their concern, given the long and racially charged history of vouchers.

School vouchers drew little public interest until *Brown v. Board of Education* and the court-ordered desegregation of public schools. Southern states devised voucher schemes for students to leave public schools and take the public funding with them.

Author Kevin Michael Kreuse explains how this plan was supposed to work in *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*. “At the heart of the plan to defend school segregation, for instance, stood a revolutionary scheme called the ‘private-school plan.’ In 1953, a full year before *Brown*, Governor Talmadge advanced a constitutional amendment giving the General Assembly the power to privatize the state’s entire system of public education. In the event of court-ordered desegregation, school buildings would be closed, and students would receive grants to attend private, segregated schools.”

Given the racist origins of vouchers, advocates of privatization have had to do two things: obscure the fact that the pro-privatization movement is backed primarily by white conservatives, and emphasize the support of African American and Democratic lawmakers where it exists.

In 2000, Howard Fuller founded the Black Alliance for Education Options. The group was largely funded by John Walton and the Bradley Foundation. Walton, a son of Walmart founder Sam Walton, contributed millions to the Betsy DeVos-led All Children Matter organization, including a bequest after his death in a plane crash in 2004.

[A report by People for the American Way](#) questions whose interest was being served in the partnership between the Alliance and conservative foundations. The summary of the report reads, “Over the past nine months, millions of Americans have seen lavishly produced TV ads featuring African American parents talking about school vouchers. These ads and their sponsor, the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), portray vouchers as an effort to help low-income kids. But a new report explores the

money trail behind BAEO, finding that it leads directly to a handful of wealthy right-wing foundations and individuals that have a deep agenda -- not only supporting the school voucher movement, but also backing anti-affirmative action campaigns and other efforts that African American organizations have opposed or considered offensive.”

Black Commentator.com was more blunt, [describing vouchers](#) as “The Right’s Final Answer to *Brown*” and tracking the history of vouchers from die-hard segregationists to the Heritage Foundation’s attempt to attach vouchers to federal legislation in 1981. The article stated, “The problem was, vouchers were still firmly (and correctly) associated with die-hard segregationists. Memories of white “massive resistance” to integration remained fresh, especially among blacks, who had never demanded vouchers -- not even once in all of the tens of thousands of demonstrations over the previous three decades.”

The article continues, “Former Reagan Education Secretary William Bennett understood what was missing from the voucher political chemistry: minorities. If visible elements of the black and Latino community could be ensnared in what was then a lily-white scheme, then the Right’s dream of a universal vouchers system to subsidize general privatization of education, might become a practical political project. More urgently, Bennett and other right-wing strategists saw that vouchers had the potential to drive a wedge between blacks and teachers unions, cracking the Democratic Party coalition. In 1988, Bennett urged the Catholic Church to 'seek out the poor, the disadvantaged...and take them in, educate them, and then ask society for fair recompense for your efforts' -- vouchers. The game was on.”

In this winning formula, vouchers or “scholarships” are advertised as the only hope for under served and urban minority children. Those who dare to defend public education from voucher schemes are, ironically, implied to be racist. Glossy brochures published by the DeVos-led entity All Children Matter show smiling faces of little children as well as those of the African American and Democratic politicians who have joined the campaign. Kevin Chavous, a former D.C. city councilman who takes credit for “shepherding” vouchers in D.C. and New Orleans, served as senior advisor to All Children Matters and now leads the BAEO and sits on the board of the DeVos-led AFC and Democrats for Education Reform.

All Children Matter [was fined](#) \$5.2 million dollars in Ohio for breaking campaign finance laws, and lost an appeal in early 2010. The fine has not been paid. The DeVos-led organization also received bad press due to a fine in Wisconsin for failing to register their PAC as well as complaints in other states. In 2010 the entity began working under the name American Federation for Children (AFC) and registered new affiliate PACs across the nation, just in time for the 2010 elections.

The 2010 effort included a state that was not even included in Dick DeVos’ list of potential targets when he spoke to the Heritage Foundation in 2002 -- Pennsylvania. An affiliate of AFC registered a PAC in Pennsylvania in March 2010 and less than a year later a voucher bill, SB-1, was sponsored in the Senate.

Throughout this well-coordinated campaign, the Pennsylvania press never once mentioned the name Betsy DeVos.

The Religious Right Foot Soldiers

The strategy in Pennsylvania in 2010, like efforts in other states, benefited from years of previous efforts to build alliances in the voucher movement. The conservative policy institutes have limited reach in the general public. In order to win the battle for hearts and minds, a larger public relations effort is required. The Religious Right fills this role with their tremendous broadcast capability and growing access to churches and homes. The partnership between free market fundamentalists and social conservatives is often contentious, but they share a common goal -- to end secular public education. The free marketers object to the “public” aspect while the Religious Right objects to the “secular” component of public education.

A significant forum that brings together free-market power brokers and Religious Right leaders is the Council for National Policy (CNP), a [secretive group](#) that has met several times annually behind closed doors since 1981. Richard DeVos described CNP as bringing together the “donors and the doers.” This partnership gives the Religious Right access to major funders, including Richard Mellon Scaife, who are not social conservatives.

Many of the free-market think tanks are secular, but there is a trend toward merging free-market fundamentalism with right-wing religious ideology. The Acton Institute is described by religious historian Randall Balmer as an example of the merging of corporate interests with advocates of “dominion theology.” [Dominionism](#) is the belief that Christians must take control over societal and government institutions. The Acton Institute funds events featuring dominionist leaders including Gary North, who claims that the bible mandates free market capitalism or “Biblical Capitalism.”

Betsy DeVos has served on the board of Acton, which is also funded by Scaife, Bradley and Exxon Mobil. A shared goal of this unlikely group of libertarians and theocrats is their battle against environmental regulation. One of the Acton Institute fellows leads a group of Religious Right organizations called the Cornwall Alliance, which is currently marketing a DVD titled *Resisting the Green Dragon*. The [pseudo-documentary describes](#) global warming as a hoax and claims environmentalism is a cult attacking Christianity. Another shared goal of the free marketers and Christian dominionists is eradicating secular public education.

Gary North explains why getting students out of public schools is key to the Christian dominionist camp. “So let us be blunt about it: we must use the doctrine of religious liberty to gain independence for Christian schools until we train up a generation of people who know that there is no religious neutrality, no neutral law, no neutral education, and no neutral civil government. Then they will get busy in constructing a Bible-based social, political, and religious order which finally denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God.”

And the Christian Right has been busy enacting this vision. One of the first goals of the Christian Coalition was to take control of 500 local public school boards, and it's a strategy the Religious Right has continued. One prominent example is [Cynthia Dunbar](#), one of the members of the Texas State Board of Education which made controversial changes to the state’s social studies curriculum in 2010. Dunbar, who was advised by right-wing self-styled “historian” David Barton, is author of *One Nation*

Under God and has described sending children to public schools as “throwing them into the enemy’s flames, even as the children of Israel threw their children to Moloch.”

In addition to getting Trojan horses on school boards, the Religious Right has played a significant role in disseminating anti-public school propaganda and forming alliances to support vouchers for private schools. Family Research Council (FRC), one of the entities funded by the Prince and DeVos families, documents the effort in Pennsylvania to cultivate a partnership between Protestants and Catholics who wanted public funding for their sectarian schools.

The data accompanying proposed bill SB-1, indicates that the majority of the public school funds that will be spent on vouchers will pay tuition for students already enrolled in private schools. In Milwaukee 80 percent of voucher program schools are religiously affiliated, according to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. In Cleveland, 52 percent of the students in the 29 Catholic diocesan schools are using taxpayer-funded vouchers, according to the *Plain Dealer*.

FRC’s Web site includes [a 1999 speech](#) by one of Pat Robertson’s biographers, in which he describes the school choice alliance in Pennsylvania of Protestant and Catholic leaders along with the Commonwealth Foundation and REACH Alliance. Commonwealth is a state think tank funded by the Scaife foundations. REACH Alliance is the statewide pro-voucher activist organization funded by the DeVos-led Alliance for School Choice (now also renamed American Federation for Children). This alliance is further described in the speech as forming "ties to black legislators based in Philadelphia, including Dwight Evans. This was big news for the Pennsylvania education reform movement because Evans is a powerful legislator and community leader."

Evans would indeed become key to expanding vouchers in the Philadelphia area, and he and state Senator Anthony Williams (not to be confused with the D.C. mayor by the same name), both Democrats, serve as directors of the BAE0.

The Battle for Pennsylvania

By the 2010 election, the groundwork had been laid and the heavy artillery brought into the state of Pennsylvania. First, a PAC was registered in March 2010 by Republican strategist Joe Watkins under the name Students First. Affiliated with the DeVos and Chavous-led AFC, the PAC shared the name with the organization founded by Michelle Rhee, a star of the popular pro-privatization movie *Waiting for Superman*. The [Web site](#) of Students First PAC touts the African-American Watkins' experience as an adviser to a president and pastor. There is no mention of the fact that the president was George W. Bush. The bio also neglects to include Watkins' ties to the Republican Party or his role in attack ads run on Fox News against presidential candidate Barack Obama in 2008.

Students First PAC [received over](#) \$6 million in donations for use in the 2010 elections, much of that donated by three mega-donors whose names were unfamiliar to most Pennsylvanians. The three mega-donors, Joel Greenberg, Jeffrey Yass and Arthur Dantchik, also contributed over a million dollars to the AFC-affiliated PAC in Indiana and \$6,000 dollars each to the gubernatorial campaign of Scott Walker. The Indiana PAC total was raised to almost \$6 million by a few contributors, including Betsy DeVos herself and several Walton family members. Most of that money did not stay in Indiana [but was](#)

[distributed](#) to affiliated PACs in six other states, including over a million sent back to Pennsylvania's Students First.

Much of the Students First money went to the long-shot gubernatorial campaign of Anthony Williams. Williams lost in the primaries, but he brought statewide attention to his primary campaign cause -- school vouchers. Among Students First's millions of expenditures was a \$575 payment for conference registration to the Council for National Policy.

Pennsylvania press did not pay much attention to the background of the donors of the unprecedented millions pouring into the election in support of a single issue, describing them simply as supporters of school choice. Greenberg serves on the board of the Betsy DeVos-led AFC; Yass on the board of the pro-privatization think tank Cato Institute; and Dantchik on the board of the Institute for Justice, which describes itself as a merry band of libertarian litigators and is perhaps best known for its battles against affirmative action. It's funded by Koch, Bradley, Olin, Scaife and Walton foundations and has now become a champion of school vouchers. The organization was credited by Dick DeVos in his 2002 speech as serving a significant role through challenges to the Blaine Amendments in numerous states, which disallow public funds to be spent supporting religious schools.

Money continues to be spent on attack ads against both Republican and Democratic senators opposed to SB-1. The Scaife-funded Commonwealth Foundation has created a webpage to pressure wavering Republicans. The Koch-funded FreedomWorks sponsored mailers attacking Republican state Senator Stewart Greenleaf. The mailer is headlined, "There's a battle in Harrisburg over our children's future. Who will win? Our children or the powerful teacher's union?" A Students First PAC [mailer attacks](#) Democratic state Senator Daylin Leach as opposing the bill because, "he is listening to teacher union leaders who oppose SB-1 and have contributed a fortune to people like Leach."

Much of the Indiana PAC money was also used in media campaigns, including funds sent to Florida for media purchases. AFC was the sole funder of a pro-voucher group that ran ads in Jewish publications attacking Dan Gelber, a Jewish candidate for Florida attorney general who opposed vouchers. Full page "wanted ads" were purchased in Jewish publications accusing Gelber of "crimes against Jewish education." Other ads purchased just prior to the election described Gelber as "Toxic to Jewish Education" in red Halloween-style letters.

Dick DeVos' model for "rewards and consequences" as described in his 2002 speech, is at work in Pennsylvania, Florida, and elsewhere, and it's a project funded by a few mega-donors. The voucher warriors with their unlimited funding are trying to create the absurd impression that they are the altruistic David in battle against the teachers' union Goliath.

Betsy DeVos has announced that Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker are scheduled to speak at the National Policy Summit of the American Federation for Children on May 9. Walker wants to expand vouchers in Milwaukee despite the program's failure, made clear by disappointing standardized test results. Walker's response? To halt the testing. Pennsylvania voucher supporters have [already taken care](#) of the pesky issue of accountability by defeating an amendment that would require the students using vouchers to take standardized tests.

During the AFC's summit, it's doubtful there will be speeches about eradicating public education but there will certainly be public relations-produced media everywhere, showing the beautiful faces of the little children these voucher proponents are supposedly saving. And Betsy DeVos, the four-star general of the voucher wars, will continue to advance a stealth campaign against American communities and working families -- the battle to eradicate public education.

© 2011 Independent Media Institute. All rights reserved.