

New York Times uses racial politics to promote charter schools

By Nancy Hanover
14 December 2019

On November 26, the *New York Times* ran a front-page “news” article (“Minority Voters Chafe as Democratic Candidates Abandon Charter Schools”) claiming that “black and Latino families” are “feeling betrayed” by Democratic Party candidates who have criticized charter schools. In the article, the *Times*, which is politically aligned with the Democratic Party, complains that “the front-runners for the presidential nomination are moving away from the charter school movement.”

The event seized upon by the newspaper as the supposed expression of widespread sentiment among African Americans in favor of charter schools and anger over Democratic candidates’ criticisms of charters is the appearance of a group of primarily black protesters at last month’s Democratic presidential debate in Atlanta. The protest involved at most a few hundred people mobilized from across the country.

The group, calling itself the Powerful Parent Network, wielded signs with slogans such as “Charter schools = self-determination” and “Black Democrats want charters!” The GoFundMe sponsoring the trip said the purpose was to confront Elizabeth Warren, who had criticized charters during an appearance with American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten on the picket line of striking Chicago teachers the previous month.

That 11-day strike won broad support among workers, youth and many middle-class people in Chicago and nationally, in large part because it was seen as a struggle in defense of public education against decades of funding cuts and the promotion of privately owned and managed charter schools.

At one point, a mass march of teachers and other workers took over the city center. Bus drivers refused to take money from those traveling to the teachers’ rally. It was a class movement, not a racial one, which received overwhelming support from workers of all ethnicities (the Chicago Public Schools are 47 percent Hispanic and 36 percent African American).

The strike was called reluctantly by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) after the Democratic mayor and Chicago Public Schools officials refused to negotiate a contract that included token improvements to make it sellable to the rank-and-file, along with more input from the union to protect the interests of the CTU bureaucracy. The union, with the full support of Warren, Bernie Sanders and rest of the Democratic field, proceeded to isolate the strike and sign a sellout agreement that paves the way for more school closures and fails to seriously address the need for more teachers and support staff.

The Chicago teachers’ strike was part of a wave of teachers’ strikes in the US over the past two years involving hundreds of thousands of educators and school workers. A number of these strikes began as rank-and-file actions carried out in defiance of the teachers’ unions.

The unstated political agenda behind the *Times*’ article is to counter this growth of working-class unity and militancy by sowing racial divisions, and simultaneously maintain the ruling class offensive against public education. It is in line with the *Times*’ efforts to push the Democratic presidential race further to the right.

It is part of a deeply reactionary campaign by the *Times* to promote racialist politics and make it the focus of the Democrats’ 2020 election campaign. At the center of this effort is the newspaper’s 1619 Project, which is being promoted in schools across the US. The “Project,” which the *World Socialist Web Site* and leading historians interviewed by the WSWS have subjected to a thorough historical and political critique, attempts to rewrite US history as one unbroken story of hatred and oppression of “black people” by “white people.”

The co-authors of the *Times*’ November 26 article on charter schools, Erica L. Green and Eliza Shapiro, shamelessly quote charter operators themselves as evidence of broad “grassroots” support among minorities for charters. They write that charter schools were the means by which Democrats promised “to deliver black and Latino families a way out of failing district schools.” They present charters as “opposed” to Republican demands for school vouchers. In fact, these are two sides of the same privatization coin.

But the big lie presented as “news” is the claim that “charter schools that serve mostly low-income children of color in large cities tend to excel academically,” and wait lists are “swelling into the hundreds of thousands.”

The notion that charters are rooted in a desire to “reform” education, particularly for the most vulnerable, is a myth fueled by right-wing and Wall Street interests. One faction, represented by the billionaire US education secretary, Betsy DeVos, aims to supplant public secular education with religious indoctrination; another, like the hedge fund lobbying group Democrats for Education Reform, wants to establish a lucrative free-market system of schooling. These reactionary interests, of course, overlap.

Both are hostile to the democratic conception of free education for all. That long tradition of struggle—from Thomas Jefferson to Thaddeus Stevens to John Dewey to the civil rights movement—sought to expand access to knowledge and establish the education of the young as a fundamental responsibility of society, free from predatory profit interests.

It is true, as Green and Shapiro allege, that Democrats, including Barack Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, promised that charters would aid minority children. This was a lie from the start. (Obama was an early member of the Democrats for Education Reform).

The truth is that the proliferation of charter businesses, now educating about 3 percent of US students, has meant the further slashing of school budgets and worsening of educational opportunities for all. Further, because charters have grown in number within inner cities, they have had a disproportionately negative effect on minorities’ neighborhood schools. To the extent that a few children have benefited from charters, it has been at the expense of the vast majority, whose education has been severely compromised.

As for Green and Shapiro’s claim that most impoverished minorities who attend these inner-city charters excel—that is a lie. With the exception of a few charters lavishly endowed by foundation money, most provide a

substandard education.

An *Education Week* research report issued in January 2019 showed that at least one-quarter of US charter schools chronically graduate less than 50 percent of their students—a far inferior rate to traditional public schools. Chicago, in particular, has seen a collapse of new charter school applications over the past three years, while several existing schools cannot get off the academic “warning” list. The Chicago Virtual Charter School has “one of the lowest graduation rates in the district” and is currently under investigation.

Moreover, Green and Shapiro’s claim of “swelling wait lists” utilizes dubious five-year-old statistics gleaned directly from the big-business-funded charter lobbying group, the National Alliance for Charter Schools. In a recent article, Diane Ravitch, the noted education historian, dismissed this as a “marketing ploy” and cited examples of unfilled seats and charter closures around the country due to declining enrollment.

The reporters focused on one participant at the Atlanta protest whose plight could be used to promote their agenda. “As a single mom with two jobs and five hustles, I’m just feeling kind of desperate,” said Sonia Tyler, who will be enrolling her children in an Atlanta charter school. “It’s not fair,” she added. “Why shouldn’t I have a choice?”

As Tyler’s statement indicates, what support does exist among working class and minority parents for charter schools is largely a desperate response to the systematic gutting of the public schools over decades by the ruling class and both big business parties.

The *Times* brings her forward in a cynical attempt to conceal the true nature of the group that organized the demonstration. The Powerful Parent Network is what is known as an “Astroturf” organization: a faux “grassroots” group that is funded and directed by Wall Street. PPN’s backers include the pro-privatization Walton Family Foundation and the California Charter Association, supported by right-wing Netflix founder Reed Hastings. The Waltons are the richest non-royal family in the world, reputedly worth over \$500 billion. Hastings weighs in at \$4 billion.

Other participants in the demonstration underscore the dubious nature of the Powerful Parent Network. KIPP, the nation’s largest charter operation, with nearly 250 schools nationwide, predominantly located in poor neighborhoods, sent a marching band to accompany the group.

Speaking with the *Times* at the rally, KIPP chief of policy Richard Buery concurred that the “shift” of the Democrats belied a “lack of respect for black voters.” The *Times* also noted the pro-charter comments of Tariq Abdullah (who is planning to open a charter school in the Atlanta suburbs next year), Ricardo Mireles (founder of the Academia Avance charter school in Los Angeles), Tiffany Green-Abdullah (a self-described “philanthropist” and founder of the Community Academy for Architecture and Design charter) and the highly connected Howard Fuller.

Fuller, a former superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools, first became prominent in the 1990s for supporting school vouchers and has gone on to make a highly lucrative living promoting “choice” among African Americans. His Black Alliance for Education Options has collected money from the Walton Family Foundation, the Bradley Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Describing integration as “failed,” Fuller calls for schools led and controlled by black people and takes credit for inspiring hundreds of such operations.

The *Times*’ attempt to present support for charter schools as an expression of the democratic sentiment of the African American masses is a fiction—and a politically sinister one.

One example of the widespread hostility of African American and Hispanic parents to the charter movement is New Orleans, where the city’s public school system was dismantled in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and Newark, New Jersey. In 2010, Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg joined with Newark’s then-mayor Cory Booker to “flip the city” and make it “the charter school capital of the nation.” Booker set about cutting

the wages of Newark teachers and imposing merit pay and other attacks.

Despite the infusion of \$100 million into publicity campaigns to promote charters, conditions for both children and teachers in predominantly black and Hispanic Newark worsened. Booker faced a firestorm of opposition. Now, presidential candidate Booker—also long associated with the Democrats for Educational Reform—is fraudulently writing in the *Times* that “many of these schools are serving low-income urban children across the country in ways that are inclusive, equitable, publicly accountable and locally driven.”

The use of race to conceal the profit motives behind charter schools has become a stock-in-trade of the *Times*. In a recent interview posted on its website, co-author Shapiro admitted that “charters have a lot of money from hedge funders and Wall Street,” but she praised them for “changing the culture” and seeking to address the “big gap between the race of teachers and their kids.” She said charters are making big strides hiring minority teachers, and that “When teachers of color are in the classrooms, the discipline naturally changes [for the better].” The logic of this argument is the complete segregation of schools and classrooms.

The confluence of the Democrats’ divisive racial politics and support for edubusinesses seeking to open up public education for plunder is not new. Under Bill Clinton, the notorious Charter School Program (CSP) was established, and Obama vastly expanded it. The fate of this program, which Warren and Sanders have pledged to eliminate, no doubt influenced some of the petty-bourgeois demonstrator-entrepreneurs.

Over its lifetime, the Charter School Program has transferred billions of tax dollars to charter businesses across the US. According to a new Network for Public Education report, more than \$500 million in federal money was spent on schools that either never opened or have since closed. In Michigan, the home state of Betsy DeVos, 44 percent of the schools that won grants are no longer open. Michigan charter business owners received a staggering \$111,074,605 for these operations.

Predictably, the reaction of Warren and her Democratic Party spokespeople in Atlanta to the pro-charter protest was to tack right. They treated the self-seeking largely upper-middle-class group with deference. Representative Ayanna Pressley (Democrat from Massachusetts) addressed the demonstrators, saying, “No one is here to quiet you. You are welcome here. The senator is here to talk about the contributions fighters like you have made to history.” She concluded, “We are grateful for your activism.”

The Democratic and Republican parties and the capitalist system they serve are responsible for the grave crisis facing schools. It falls to the working class to defend and expand public education. This today is a revolutionary question.

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