Democratic Party elites have abandoned public education

Too many Democrats advocate education reforms that affect other people’s children
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For years, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s children attended public school in Virginia. Now, he has announced that they will go to the University of Chicago Laboratory School, the private school where Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel sends his kids and where Barack Obama sent his daughters when he lived in Chicago. The tuition for the 2015-2016 school year is approximately $30,000.

Duncan’s senior advisor and former education commissioner of New York, John King, also sends his daughters to a private Montessori school near Albany; New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s daughters, on their part, attend an elite boarding school in Massachusetts.

There is nothing wrong with private school. The problem here, though, is that too many Democratic elites advocate education reforms such as the Common Core standards, charter schools, and high-stakes testing with minimal first-hand knowledge of how they affect schools or children. In sending their children to private schools, Democratic elites exempt themselves from policies that they might oppose if they saw their own children being harmed by them.

Obama’s lead
In 2008, many Democrats hoped that Barack Obama would send his children to public school as Jimmy Carter did before him. In their book “President Obama and Education Reform,” Robert Maranto and Michael Q. McShane explain why that was not likely to happen.

The key to understanding Obama’s education policy, according to Maranto and McShane, is his biography. Obama attended the prestigious Punahou School in Hawaii, an experience that prepared him for college and law school. Obama also observed from a distance a Hawaiian public school system rife with ethnic violence, low academic standards and an unresponsive bureaucracy. These experiences influenced Obama’s decision to send his daughters to Sidwell Friends, the elite Washington, D.C. institution whose alumni include the younger Albert Gore and Chelsea Clinton.

As president, Obama has advocated reforms to the public education system that include upping merit pay, weakening tenure rules and evaluating teachers by student test scores. Obama’s most controversial education policy, however, was the Race to the Top program that gave states additional incentives to adopt the Common Core standards.

Arne Duncan chose for his own children a school that was minimally affected by the reforms he advocated as education secretary.

The Common Core, according to one critic, is “the product of a push by private foundations acting in the interest of multinational corporations to colonize public education in the United States.” The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable and corporations such as IBM and Exxon have backed the Common Core. Still, politicians are essential to generate sufficient support for effective market-based education reform.

Maranto and McShane applaud Obama’s efforts to recast education reform in the language of equity, justice and civil rights. Just as President Richard Nixon was able to convince Republicans to make peace with China, Obama has been able to convince Democrats to support market-based education reforms.
The question remains, though: Are these reforms making public schools better? Or are they widening the gap between the kinds of education offered at public and elite private schools?

No skin in the game

According to education scholar Diane Ravitch, most educated parents believe that good schools have full curricula, experienced staffs, arts programs, well-staffed libraries, beautiful campuses and small classes. All of these things are par for the course at America’s finest private schools.

But it costs a lot of money to offer students this kind of education. In response, education reformers favor economies of scale, where students across the country take the same standardized tests, as well as reforms that tend to favor corporations rather than teachers. For example, the Race to the Top program awarded Pearson almost $200 million to develop the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Common Core tests.

However, many parents resent the way in which children’s education now consists of little more than preparing for and taking standardized tests. One blogger in Chicago, for example, notes that the Lab School offers a rich arts curriculum, small classes, a unionized workforce and a policy of not giving students a standardized test until they are at least 14 years old. Meanwhile, children in the local public schools must take a steady stream of standardized tests and have little exposure to history, science, art or music. The blogger wryly observes that Arne Duncan has chosen for his own children a school that has been minimally affected by the reforms that he advocated as Education Secretary.

Since at least the 1990s, education reformers have argued that schools should be run like businesses focused on the bottom line — in this case, test scores. Parents and educators from across the spectrum reply that our society should
strive to offer all children the kind of opportunities provided at the finest private schools.

Unfortunately, too many Democratic elites have joined the side of market-based economic reform. They may do so with a clear conscience, perhaps, because their own children do not suffer the consequences.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.