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**In a Just World, We Could Have Had  
Free, Universal, Public Education  
Solidarity America  
By John Funicello  
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There's a plan afoot that supposedly mixes center, right, and (sort of) left politics to reform the U.S. education system and it features such luminaries as Newt Gingrich; the failed congressional revolutionary and part-time historian; Michael Bloomberg, the New York mayor and billionaire, and Al Sharpton, the reverend and self-described civil rights activist.

All three are among the leaders of a school reform movement called the Education Equality Project (EEP), the stated mission of which is "to eliminate the racial and ethnic achievement gap in public education by working to create an effective school for every child."

They quite correctly state that "our public education system is in a state of crisis," but they do not enumerate the things in the system that have brought it to a crisis. Although they utter the usual platitudes about what it takes to create a school system in which children can thrive and reach their maximum potential, they do not address the very fundamental issues in the failure of schools, from kindergarten through at least the undergraduate level.

EEP calls this effort a civil rights movement. They want an "effective teacher" in every classroom. They want to give parents a "meaningful voice" in their children's education. They want to effect a "single-minded focus: what will best serve our students."

Although it's listed at the end of EEP's stated goals, this one is telling: "Have the strength in our convictions to stand up to those political forces and interests who seek

to preserve a failed system.”

Right after that, its statement says: “EEP is using grass-roots and grass-tops strategies to create a non-partisan movement of students, parents, community leaders, educators, religious leaders, business leaders, civil rights advocates, academics, and policymakers who demand focused efforts at the city, state, and federal level to close the achievement gap.”

The group uses the term “educators” in listing all of the elements of the educational community they are gathering together, but there is no mention of the teachers’ unions - the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA).

Both are favorite whipping boys of the right wing, many of whose main spokespersons blame the teachers and their unions for the failing public school system. That must be the reason for EEP’s having shied away from even mentioning the unions. Apparently, they are not interested in what the teachers, through their unions, have to offer to solve some of the problems in schools.

Teachers are the ones on the ground and they are the ones who are in the classrooms every day. They know the problems and they have solutions - not for everything, but for many things.

One of the flaws of the teachers’ unions may be that they have not fought hard enough to bring the changes to the schools, because it was just not worth the continued pounding that they took as the scapegoats for the failures in education.

Being rather conservative unions, they are not going to make too many waves in education. They work in a conservative context - not surprising, considering the organization of school districts, school boards, the publications of textbooks, and the other bureaucratic elements of American education.

Teachers are, after all, among the unionized workers of America and they have suffered along with their brothers and sisters as organized labor has been attacked without end for three generations and brought to its current state. Even fellow (non-union) workers have routinely blamed unionized workers for the failure of companies, giving a free pass to the executives who literally milked their companies with pay and perks and mismanaged until there was nothing left. At the end, there were still the workers to blame.

It’s not too hard to guess that charter schools are going to be high on the list of priorities of EEP. They’ll push these schools as hard as they can and the sponsors of EEP have the political power and the deep pockets to do it. They also have the full support of the Obama Administration, as they did the Bush Administration.

Little mentioned so far by EEP as a problem in the schools is the shift from education as a way to generate a love of learning and to make learning a life-long pursuit, to a way to fit unthinkingly into the machinery of society so the individual can find a job, make money, and get rich, if possible.

The end result of the new educational philosophy is not something that many of us

would have tolerated in times past. Is it any wonder that youngsters don't want to be part of it any more than is necessary? Is it any wonder that they don't want to learn the things they are given to learn?

The commercialization of education - from the textbooks, to school architecture, to the food service, to advertising on school grounds, and so many other areas of student life - is a problem that hasn't been fully addressed.

School district taxpayers, to a small degree, have some influence on the atmosphere in which their children are taught. Part of that is the result of a loose collaboration between the parents and the teachers and others within each district.

In cases in which there are teaching or curriculum questions or something as simple as the selling of the children to junk food companies, the parents and teachers and taxpayers have had some success in directing the conduct of education in their communities.

Charter schools, although they are paid for out of taxpayer funds, are largely allowed to escape scrutiny by the general public. The schools take money from the public school district in which they are located, but they are given a free ride in some areas. For example, most of these schools are not unionized - in fact, very few are unionized and the teachers' working conditions and pay are not at the same standard as the other public schools.

To be fair, some charter schools have done good work in raising achievement levels of individual students, but many have run into difficulties academically and financially. Charter schools are often run by private corporations that are for-profit, a characteristic that is a sharp departure from the educational outlook of public schools in most cities and suburbs. The need to make a profit affects the overall quality of education.

The long view of the charter school movement is a product of the fertile imaginations of politicians and interests on the right side of the political spectrum, who firmly believe that government can do nothing right and everything that it is possible to privatize should be privatized. Charter schools are their answer to the zeal for privatizing public schools.

America's efforts to get free, universal public education for all children came from the struggle more than 100 years ago of working people, whose children were not being educated as a part of the national interest, because they could work in the factories or on the farms, or in the fields. Who needed an education for that?

Wage workers, individually and through their unions, knew that advancement for their children would be through education. The children of the rich always have been educated, but to get children of working people educated would be a fight. They did fight for it and we achieved free, universal public education, something that, even today, others around the world wish to emulate, despite the problems in our own system.

The problems in our educational system are myriad and any person or group that can help solve them will be doing a good thing. But EEP's expressed goals seem to be attempting to resolve societal issues - such as lack of health care, unemployment,

impoverished communities, and children at risk of failure and imprisonment - at the school level.

This new group seems to be starting again, as if there never was a civil rights movement in the Sixties, when there was an effort to integrate everyone into the society and economy and when affirmative action was a way to help achieve that. Many of EEP's issues are those that have been left hanging from the main civil rights movement of the 20th Century, but this time, it looks as if there will be corporate money to "help out," not a comprehensive government program that could be enforced by the U.S. Justice Department.

With that kind of help, it may not take too long to pretty much get government out of the picture, along with pesky things like teachers' unions and parent-teacher-student organizations, and other groups with long histories of fighting for social and economic justice.


The racial and ethnic achievement gap that EEP purports to address in American schools will be eliminated when we have a just society.


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**BlackCommentator.com** Columnist, John Funciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funciello.

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