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***Teachers as Owners: A Key to Revitalizing Public Education* edited by
Edward J. Dirkswager (The Scarecrow Press, 2002)**
William Vaughn

Remember the Ownership Society? One of the least mourned victims of Katrina, this Bush initiative aimed to dismantle what's left of the New Deal and Great Society by replacing public programs promising retirement security and health coverage with private accounts emphasizing personal responsibility. If (currently) moribund as a wholesale revision of our social code, the premise of ownership continues to circulate as a reform tool in other, more limited sectors. Witness *Teachers as Owners: A Key to Revitalizing Public Education*. An alluring title, to be sure, for those of us who often get well into our thirties without owning a home—or, in my case, even furniture. Of course, editor Edward J. Dirkswager and his co-authors are arguing for ownership of education itself. The prospect of such authority would elevate teachers to the level of other professionals, and this enhancement, our authors suggest, would improve student learning.

Specifically, the book argues for an entrepreneurial model of education leading to an entity called the “teacher professional partnership.” These partnerships, in turn, would compete for students, whether as stand-alone institutions or insourced components of existing public or proprietary schools. Inevitably, such marketized initiatives would unbundle the compact of public education. Clearly, competition creates winners and losers—a scenario that might tend to militate against comprehensive student learning. Unsurprisingly, in teacher professional partnerships “[t]here is no tenure—no guarantee of a job” (4).

Just as, we might imagine, the “associates” at Wal-Mart don’t need unions.

Nightmarish as these proposals might sound with their reference to education management organizations, confounding as they may be in disguising increased accountability as greater autonomy (can we agree to call this “the cell phone effect?”), and perplexing as we may find an argument that asks us to radically restructure our system of education yet postpones considering an existing structure it would obviate—teacher unions—for sixty-one pages . . . I strained to unearth some merit here. And stretch though it may be, I kept thinking that the version of teacher that Dirkswager and his colleagues advocate looks something like a university professor. Consider the following definition:

Teacher ownership breaks through our customary notions about how teaching is practiced. It recognizes that teachers are professionals and ought to have latitude to practice their trade as other professionals do. Lawyers, doctors, and accountants form and run their own businesses around their areas of expertise. They hire administrators, if necessary, to run the administrative aspects of the business. In this way, they can spend their time using their expertise to its fullest extent.

In a teacher professional partnership, teachers form their own business to practice the teaching profession. Their “business” is to educate. The responsibility for running the business and achieving success lies with the partners. A teacher professional partnership could be formed as a non-profit or for-profit enterprise....

The formation of a partnership introduces an element of entrepreneurship into how teaching is practiced. But it need not place monetary gain over the desire to serve, which is a driving motivation of most teachers, just as it can be for people in other professions such as medicine and law. The business requirement to perform well is not inconsistent with the desire to serve and indeed provides an added incentive for quality teacher performance. (2)

Having worked, successively, as a high school teacher, a graduate employee, an instructor, and a professor, I can say that the last of these statuses has been the most satisfying for me. So if *that’s* what Dirkswager et al. are advocating, I am all for it, though I would be happy to explain to him why tenure remains necessary—after first clarifying what tenure *is*—as well as why many faculty at teaching institutions such as mine continue—like their colleagues in primary and secondary ed—to choose unions.

Should we opt to be less generous in our understanding of this book, we might reference any number of troublesome passages. A teacher professional partnership, we are told, “consciously seeks the best teachers for membership” (20). Is this not currently true in our schools? And if not, isn’t it the infallible market that determines who goes into teaching? “It is also a good practice,” we later learn, “to ask references about a potential member’s attitude toward vision and mission” (39). OK, but if teachers are professionals on par with lawyers and doctors, aren’t vision and mission part of their make-up? Or do only some Sneetches get to wear stars? (Does this mean I just forfeited partner?)

To the extent that Dirkswager’s world and my own intersect—to the degree that professors may own their jobs in ways that many high school teachers do not—one might profit (that’s what owners do, right?) from spending some time with this book. One should always be willing to learn new things. For example,

EdVisions Cooperative . . . learned that it is impossible to carry on the work of being a teacher owner if teachers are not willing to commit to a great deal of work. With the freedom of controlling one’s own destiny comes the responsibility that all business owners have: it is not an eight-to-four job. (95)

That's right, teachers. We'll let you become owners, but only if you'll give up those cushy work weeks. (Some of those holidays will have to go, too.)

It must be nice to possess the confidence to redesign a world you don't even begin to understand. Here I am, working on this review at 9:30, five or so hours after I got home from school. I *do* appreciate the freedom of controlling my own destiny. After all, nobody *made* me read this book. And at least I get to write while sitting on the couch I bought eight years ago, when I could finally afford furniture. Ah, the solid satisfaction of an owned thing. We do crave such authority. Like the brick I want to throw just about now.