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## *Educational Entrepreneurship, Creative Destruction, and the Junk Food of Education Reform*

*An Interview with Alex Molnar*

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### **Abstract**

*Alex Molnar has taken up the question of commercialization in education over an extensive career that most recently has been in concert with the National Education Policy Center (NEPC), an organization dedicated to the scholarly response to this very education reform movement. In the Spring of 2012, a dialogue was engaged to explore issues of the moment for scholars of education and how we might respond.*



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## Introduction

The contemporary education reform movement has made considerable strides since the passing of NCLB in 2001 and has increasingly been driven by policy think tanks and non-profit actors. Pursuing an agenda revolving largely around school choice, expansion of charter schools, vouchers, teacher performance pay, and high-stakes accountability, these reformers represent a striking convergence of efforts across traditional political lines most notably in the position of the Obama administration. Free market solutions, while often critiqued in relation to other social issues (i.e. prisons, healthcare, fire and safety, etc.) by left-leaning organizations, appear to be embraced without question when it comes to education reform (Welner, 2011). The rise of Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) both nationally and increasingly on the state level and other organizations (i.e. Stand for Children, Teach for America, the New Teacher Project, etc.) clearly disassociate themselves from the formal Right but embrace and advocate for policies that have no discernible difference. Funded by what Ravitch (2010) refers to as the “billionaire’s boys club,” a growing bi-partisan education reform movement has taken shape and dominated the narrative construction of how to improve education in the US: choice, competition, and privatization. This convergence presents critical scholars of education—those most concerned with equity, access, and the democratic role of public education—with a tenuous struggle to find ways in which to respond to these powerful forces, influence public policy, and impact the communities in which they work.

Alex Molnar has taken up the question of commercialization in education over an extensive career that most recently has been in concert with the National Education Policy Center (NEPC), an organization dedicated to the scholarly response to this very education reform movement. In the Spring of 2012, a dialogue was engaged to explore issues of moment for scholars of education and how we might respond.

**Q: Given your extensive career in curriculum theory, educational policy analysis, and educational research, we’d like to begin with your thoughts on the “education reform movement” of the last few years. In terms of your work on commercialization and privatization and some of what is going on now both in Indianapolis and nationwide, how you would place these new efforts within the larger history of school reform?**

**Molnar:** Well these really aren’t new reforms. Certainly they are not new reforms in the last 25 years. And in fact, just to frame my comments a little bit, a reasonable question is: at what point does a series of failed reforms stop being called new reforms? Because, these are old reforms – they represent old ideas and in many respects, they are the broken status quo with which we are confronted. There is a whole collection of ideas packaged in materials that have great design values, are very slick, heavily promoted by people with money and people with visibility. But that, nevertheless, does not necessarily mean these reforms are worth doing. In fact, it almost certainly means in this environment that these reforms are not worth doing. So the evidence with regard to the efficacy of these reforms has very little to do with the valence that they have in policy circles. And the ability they have to interact with other policies or to produce an effect in policy circles is complicated to explain, difficult to understand.

I believe that part of the reason that these are powerful ideas at this particular moment is no more complicated than *powerful people support them*. And powerful people support them because, by and large, they are attached to a particular ideology and understanding of the world and how it works. That ideology and understanding is a particular and narrow reading of market theory. It’s

attached to a particular and narrow ideology associated with individualism and liberty and the meaning of those terms within the context of our political system and economic systems and therefore, necessarily within the context of our public institutions, such as public schools. In essence, this is an ideology that has little interest in either equality, or even equality of opportunity. Inequality is what the various mechanisms that this ideology promotes are interested in. Inequality is a good thing from the standpoint of this ideology because the view is that inequality means that merit is being recognized, that talent is rising to the top. And, that the best and highest purpose of any society is to allow the talent to rise to the top and to celebrate the success of that talent, both as a model and as the hope for future generations and as a value in its own right. Talent should be rewarded. Merit should be recognized. The difficulty with that sort of libertarian reading is it has no way of understanding or thinking about the concentration of wealth and how concentrated wealth interacts with political power and how political power shapes the structure of the institutions in a way that ensures that it is not talent that rises to the top but that it is class relations and inequality that is reproduced. So, these various market based reforms are in essence a way of rationalizing and obscuring the brutal fact that they in fact represent mechanisms for keeping the people that have power in place. They are mechanisms for keeping the people who have wealth in place and they create a kind of rhetorical positional veneer of interest in people who have less. In opportunities for people who have less and so on.

The international data on social mobility are becoming very clear. That is, countries with a strong social democratic system, with an array of supports that have the effect of softening disparities in wealth and poverty or at least ensuring that those who have the least do in fact have the opportunity to have lives that are not filled with uncertainty and instability and terror. Those countries, Denmark as an example, have higher levels of social mobility than the United States. The United States is now becoming the outlier in terms of the way in which inequality is stratified, the way in which privilege is now anchoring its position and reinforcing its position. So, all of these reforms have little or nothing to do with improving the quality of education that working class children, that children living in poverty, and increasingly middle class children, have. It has everything to do I believe with reinforcing and stratifying an unequal status quo.

**Q: That is very interesting and I think one of the issues that you rightly point to is in terms of *the positioning and the veneer* and how it positions schools of education, higher education, and certainly school districts. I'm curious as to what advice to those groups you might have. Given what you've described, how do you think about the responsibility of public institutions like schools of education or even leaders in the public school systems?**

**Molnar:** Just as an initial comment: part of the implication of the neoliberal economic political agenda is that it becomes harder to distinguish what represents a public institution. To some degree, public institutions have become zombies. Their form exists. They are called public institutions but in fact they are animated by private self interested entities. So you have in Indiana takeover schools. But what you really have is a zombie institution, the Department of Education—which uses its public role and its political authority to serve for-profit entities—that will be given the right to manage “the plantation” -- that is, to run the schools. And they will do so in an undemocratic fashion. That is the reason why in takeover schools, they are terrified of parents.

**Q: Who is terrified of parents?**

**Molnar:** The folks who are running the takeover schools. The last thing in the world they want is actual parental involvement because by and large the parents want them to get the hell out

of their communities. So you see that in Chicago for example where there have been large protests against the mayor's plans for yet again implementing a series of so-called reforms which have failed in the past. So that is what I mean. So, is the Indiana Department of Education politically accountable? Nominally, yes. But, in fact, no. It has nominal political controls only. And it is now simply a sock puppet for private interests. It sees itself as a facilitator for enabling the work of/for-profit entities or nonprofit entities that actually function a great deal like for-profit entities so they become in some respects indistinguishable, imposing those on communities and figuring out how to insulate them from the political process; so they can go about their business. Their principle business is profit. And the principle mechanism by which they will profit is first of all an assured source of taxpayer dollars. But secondly by suppressing the wages and altering the working conditions of the teachers. Because the greatest part of any school's budget is salaries. The greatest part of those salaries is for the professional staff and what they are doing is very similar to what we saw in the private sector with blue collar workers. That is, we see a very focused effort to shift the money in school budgets away from teachers and toward management and toward owners. Because, increasingly, schools are owned. It is nothing mysterious here. And in order to accomplish that the unions have to be either weakened or destroyed, made ineffectual. So the teachers organized together are not capable of representing themselves with any degree of power or authority. At the same time, it is necessary to celebrate great teachers. So you have this division between teachers that are terrific, a very small number, and teachers that are awful, and those are the ones that are protected by the unions and that is the reason to break the unions. So you have to have this whole language of assault on teachers in order to create a political environment in which the wealth can be transferred from the workers to management and owners.

**Q: It seems that some of that assault [rests on] allegations of over bureaucratized schools.**

**Molnar:** Let me just say with regards to bureaucracy in schools, the charge is false. It has been demonstrated to be false for several decades now. So what do I mean by false? I mean that when you compare the bureaucracy of schools to the bureaucracy in the private sector, schools are much leaner entities. But there is a problem with this anti-bureaucratic rhetoric and it is not that people love bureaucracy. They hate bureaucracies and anybody who has encountered the airline reservation system understands what a really wretched private bureaucracy looks like. It is much easier to talk to the Social Security Administration, speaking as a 66 year old, than it is to talk to Delta Airlines or United Airlines. The Social Security Administration is a much more supple and agile bureaucracy than the so-called incredibly efficient private sector bureaucracies. So number one, it is an empirically false claim. Not that that matters in the debate but it is important I think to take note of it. But secondly, if you understand what school systems do, you understand that there are things that they can't do without a bureaucracy because a bureaucracy also contains people who represent the wealth of the institution in terms of its institutional knowledge and the expertise it has to accomplish certain things.

So, take the most fundamental aspect of what schools do, the thing that is most central to the mission of schools, and that is what they actually teach, the content of the curriculum. In order to have an understanding of what curricula may have the greatest value for the children in the particular school district, it is necessary to have the expertise to evaluate and assess the curriculum, to judge its merits over time in a systematic way and to make decisions that are carefully considered with regard to the value of that curriculum for the children and the community. Absent that bureaucracy, vested in a public school system, a bureaucracy consisting of public servants whose principle responsibility is to serve the children of the school district, then what you have is what we've seen proliferate over and over again throughout this country. You

have an administrative structure for a school district that is a zombie. There are very few people there. And that zombie hires private consultants because there is no resident expertise. The private consultants are self interested parties who are promoting a particular curriculum or a particular approach to instruction and so on; they come and go. And they bring with them instability, turnover, turmoil and anything but a well reasoned, well judged understanding of the children of the school district and the curriculum that would best serve them. We see this over and over again. In fact, if you look at the last evaluation report from the Milwaukee Parent Choice Program, there is actually a heading in the report; it is called “Creative Destruction.” That is a heading in the evaluation report in which they talk proudly of the fact that some voucher schools have closed. Now, every voucher school that closes, every public school that is taken over represents not a building, it represents children’s lives and families lives. This is not a reason to celebrate. This is a reason to mourn. This is not success except in the most bizarre kind of sense of allegiance to a kind of economic idol. This is rank failure to serve students. But the focus isn’t on the children. The focus is on obedience to a particular economic theory. That is what is important. It is a tragic assault on childhood and children and particularly the most vulnerable among us.

**Q: So, piggy backing off of this—the idea that a lot of these strategies, and you’ve already sort of eluded to this, really promise innovation and encourage entrepreneurship.**

**Molnar:** And we’re not buying it either, right?

**Q: Right. All this language of entrepreneurship sort of omits this notion of risk.**

**Molnar:** No, there is no risk in it.

**Q: They *promise* innovation and encourage entrepreneurship. Certainly in terms of my own work with aspiring and current school leaders in school districts, they have also adopted that language. In response to what we were just talking about, allegations of becoming stagnant bureaucracies...**

**Molnar:** [laughs] I’m laughing only because it is laughable.

**Q: It is, right.**

**Molnar:** It would be laughable if it weren’t so sad. I don’t actually even know how one understands what is meant by the term entrepreneurship in this context. So does that mean superintendents who promote themselves and their own careers---they are *entrepreneurial* superintendents? What does this actually mean? Does it mean somebody who is good at marketing and what they do for potential investors? Certainly it doesn’t mean that they are innovating because there is nothing that I’ve seen done in any charter school, in any voucher school, or any of these so-called innovative schools that represents anything that isn’t well explored and well known and has been for years. So I don’t see the innovation. And since I can’t see the innovation, I’m not exactly sure what the focus of this entrepreneurial activity is. Nor am I sure what the presumed benefits are that are supposed to flow from this entrepreneurial activity whose focus I don’t understand. So what it sounds to me like and what it looks to me like is a rhetorical fog for a set of arrangements that are off to the side of the real needs of children in America’s schools. In other words, it sounds like a bunch of bologna (a technical term). It is a kind of blended meat product. It is sliced usually thin and contains a lot of animal byproducts and harmful chemicals.

**Q: Exactly.**

**Molnar:** This seems a lot like that but ... some people love it.

**Q: It has traction. I mean, I listen to people who don't like what they see. They don't like these takeovers and don't like the outsourcing of services that takes place in schools and impacts children and families but they sort of accept it because of this discourse around innovation and improvement.**

**Molnar:** Innovation has become just another word for doing the same thing. I mean truly. At what point does this rhetoric and do these proposals end? What is the shelf life? These proposals and this rhetoric are so stale that if it was bread, you wouldn't feed it to the ducks. So it is an interesting question in my mind. I am not disagreeing in any way with your characterization; it *has traction*. This is the vocabulary that is commonly deployed in the reform discussions and so on. But to a certain degree, that is just the same old same old. I've been around long enough and seen any number of different reforms that were going to have a significant effect come and go. What hasn't come and gone is the grinding inequality of this society. What is truly on the march is inequality. Not innovation. Not reform. Not entrepreneurship. Inequality: that is what is on the march in this society. That is the future of this society if we follow the current trajectory. This other stuff, these are leaves on a stream. This is inconsequential, unimportant and empty rhetoric. It provides a vehicle for some people to celebrate themselves, to present themselves, to attach themselves to a set of civic projects which they can glory in. It allows some individuals to profit handsomely. It allows some individuals to build their careers. There is a whole set of benefits here but unfortunately the benefits don't accrue to the children that are allegedly the purpose for the exercise. That remains unchanged. And that is the tragedy of it.

**Q: Right. It is an empty rhetoric that has very real consequences.**

**Molnar:** It does indeed. Just as empty calories have consequences. People are obese by consuming empty calories. So they have no nutritional value but they do have consequences and the consequences are negative. So by analogy, this would—these so called reform proposals are the diet, they are the equivalent of dietary empty calories. These are the sugared soft drinks. These are the junk food of reform.

**Q: Recently, you've been working with the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) and a lot of educators—both practitioners and academics—have been introduced to your work via those outreach efforts. Can you talk a little bit about your involvement in the Center's work and its stated mission of reviewing the work of policy think-tanks? How do you see that work in terms of this debate or these problems/issues?**

**Molnar:** Well, I think we all do what we can where we are. And where I am is in a university. And what I am is an academic. What I can do is I can use the skills and knowledge that I have to try and describe – first to understand – then describe. And then explain in as clear and honest fashion as I can to as many people as I can who are in one way or another engaged in or touched by these various proposals, trends, legislative enactments and so on. So at the National Education Policy Center, we have a commitment to doing high quality academic work that is highly regarded by our academic colleagues but doing it on topics which are of consequence in the moment in education policy deliberations and presenting it in a way that is assessable to literate lay people, to the media, the policy makers, to interested citizens and so on. So that they can make use of this information as they see best fit. And that is what we can do. And I think there are different roles for people, different people who are located in different places. So the work we do can provide information to community groups. It can provide information to legislatures. It can

provide information to commissioners of education, secretaries of education. It can help inform the instruction of teachers in schools and colleges of education. It can help frame and contribute to the presentation of education issues in the media. Those are all things in some small way we can contribute to it. That is what we hope to do.

There is an awful lot of work being done that is described loosely as “research” but is no such thing. They are ideologically guided polemics. The outcome is known before the pen is placed to the paper. So another thing that we can do and that we do take on is providing disinterested expert reviews of this work. Characterizing it as accurately as we can with regard to the validity of the research that is represented and what the implications are or are not of this research. So those are things that we can do at the National Education Policy Center and that we have been doing now both in NEPC and its predecessor centers. I’ve been doing this since 1998. That is what we can do. We have a very rich history now and we have an awful lot of material that is of value. So it is hard for an academic not to see the value in both this ongoing work and the archival record of this work as a point of interest for our fellow academics and for policymakers.

**Q: This is sort of a question from somebody in the beginning of an academic career: How do you get it in the right hands?**

**Molnar:** Well there is not a single answer to that, nor is getting it in the right hands any assurance of success. That is, getting it in the right hands, what we’re talking about here are long term political, economic and cultural trends. We are probably—if I had to stretch for a historical analogy—I would guess that this is a lot like the way it felt in the 1850’s when the consensus with regard to the way the world should be organized in a variety of ways was breaking down (*Editors note: an era when the northeast economy was changing, millions of Europeans and rural farmers were immigrating to the cities of the north, new territories were being acquired, the Fugitive Slave Law and abolitionism was causing controversy, leading up to the darkest years of American History, the Civil War*). That is where we find ourselves right now. So, there are no “right hands” in the sense that there used to be. There is only relentless effort and struggle with competing and conflicting voices and shifting allegiances and a full host of factors which are idiosyncratic in some respects to a particular situation and so on. So what I can say to you is that I’m 66. I’ve been doing this for 40 years. I’m still doing it. So a great deal of this is recognizing that you will never win. That you will never prevail. That there is no one way to do this. That there are no “right hands.” That all of these things move along in a variety of complicated and confusing ways. And that the best thing that I’ve found to do as an academic is to do what academics in my understanding always do. And that is to try and seek the truth as best you can and express it as clearly as you can and to continue to do that throughout your career and to find common ground with colleagues who you can nurture and who can nurture you in turn. That seems to me is what an academic can do. An academic can also understand what I take to be a simple fact and that is they are workers, not owners, and that their allegiance should be in my view to the vast majority of the people whom they serve and their interests.

**Q: Thank you for that. One more question for you. Pinar et al (2000/1995) describe your earlier work within the “Reconceptualization” of Curriculum Studies as primarily being one of advancing the critique of curriculum as explicitly political (p.226). How do you see curriculum theory today and in what ways might the field respond to this political moment?**

**Molnar:** That goes back to 1974. Well, it is hard to see curriculum theory today. I mean

just as an opening statement. But if you consider that the beating heart of a school is the curriculum, I mean it is the reason that a school exists in any conception of the school. Then you recognize the horrible disfigurement of schools by the high stakes testing regime and by the accountability regimes that have been imposed over the last decade; so much so that the curriculum is little more than the test. And the curricular method is no more than drilling for test items unless, like the Obamas, you send your kids to Sidwell Friends School. In which case, they wouldn't go near that kind of method with a 10 foot pole. As Dewey said, we should want for all children what the best among us or the best parents want for their children. Well, clearly that is not what the Obama's wish for most children, because if that were the case, you wouldn't have this dreadful man, Arne Duncan, running around the country promoting these despicable reforms. So from the standpoint of the curriculum, there is a lot of work to be done which is to speak of and to speak of clearly, forcefully and with sound reasoning and evidence about what the actual curriculum of the schools is. What kind of world is reflected inside of that curriculum? What kinds of values are promoted by that curriculum? And what might one predict of children who have been subjected to this curriculum in terms of what they might be like as adults? Those are all very, very rich areas for exploration by people who are engaged in curriculum research and curriculum studies.

**Q: Excellent.**

**Molnar:** It is what I do.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Clearly, Alex Molnar is about justice, fairness and equity. This interview has many points of interest, the most telling of which, and where he lays it on the line, is when he says he has been around long enough to have seen *any number of reforms that were going to have effect come and go*, and the only thing that remains constant *is the grinding inequality of entrepreneurship*. Moreover, he uses the *junk food analogy* as a wakeup call for educational policy makers who fall into the trap of consuming the *empty calories* of entrepreneurialism, privatization, and voucher systems.

Why have high stakes testing and accountability been foisted upon the public schools, which are primarily made up of the most economically vulnerable of our society, and not on the private schools where the economically affluent of our society attend? Who is benefiting by the fall out of “failing” (underfunded) schools and the promises of privatization? Who, in fact, is profiting from school failures, takeovers and “turnaround” models?

Should we not take heed, or at least consider some of the most poignant arguments Molnar makes about the most recent wave of *old reforms* packaged as *new reforms* wrapped popular narratives of meritocracy, entrepreneurialism and innovation? For example, it was in Indiana, where, in the early 1980s, the National Commission on Excellence in Education report unveiled numerous panaceas, emphasizing the back-to-basic movement, the accountability movement, and a new cult of efficiency in education, and proclaiming that we had a Nation at Risk. The crises then were the same as the crises reported in 1933 in the National Education Association/Superintendent's Joint Commission on Emergency in Education Report. Fast forward to 2012, almost ninety years later, and what has remained constant: the inequality of entrepreneurship and the lack of financial support needed to properly fund public schools in the way that our private schools are supported for the *haves* of our society. Despite allegations of over-bureaucratization and lack of innovation, the fundamental issue continues to be the



redistribution of resources. Who has the political will to take the leadership on this issue? Can it ever be attained and sustained in our society? These questions are but a few that emanate from this interview with a leading educational policy analyst.

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