

COMMENTARY

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PUBLIC SCHOOLS DON'T NEED PRIVATE WOES

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First we had the multimillion dollar Chrysler bailout. Then came the savings and loan crisis. Are we ready to turn the tables and let corporations run America's public schools?

That's exactly the question facing some Minnesota school districts today. A private, for-profit organization, the Alliance for Schools That Work, is making a pitch to manage school districts. It already has a toehold in two Minnesota districts. Just who is involved in this corporation, and what does it stand to gain at taxpayers' expense?

It's important to understand from the outset that public schools belong to everyone -- and everyone has a say in how they operate. Look at the makeup of any school board and you'll find leaders from all segments of the community. Business leaders, attorneys, farmers, parents and grandparents and other citizens who care about quality education serve on school boards throughout the state. We need their ideas and expertise. I'm not sure that we want to turn over control to a business enterprise that makes profit its bottom line.

The Alliance for Schools That Work is a consortium of three corporations -- Education Alternatives, Inc. (EAI); Peat Marwick, an international accounting firm; and Johnson Controls World Services, Inc., which contracts out maintenance, transportation and food delivery services. In Duluth, the Alliance supplied an interim superintendent and is conducting a study to see whether its management services could benefit the district. In Winona, the Alliance proposed to undertake a similar study, which could lead to its taking over some or all of the management responsibilities within the district.

To consider taking over responsibility for two of Minnesota's largest school districts, you would think that the Alliance has a long track record of success. In fact, the opposite seems true.

Education Alternatives, Inc. points to its Tesseract schools as examples of its achievements in education. The first Tesseract school opened in 1987 in Eagan, Minn. A second one opened the following year in Paradise Valley, Ariz. EAI also runs a Dade County, Fla. public elementary school. INC. magazine says EAI founder John Golle estimated that "by year five, he'd have 20 schools up and running, revenues of \$30 million and investors' returns of 30 percent."

It's 1992, and there is still only one Tesseract school in Arizona and one in Eagan. INC. estimates EAI losses for fiscal year 1991 of more than \$1 million. Further, Tesseract wants the Burnsville public school system to support its Eagan facility by accepting it as a charter school.

Brochures promoting the Tesseract philosophy stress individualized learning, skill-building exercises and parental involvement. Those are wonderful concepts -- ones that are regularly put into practice in our state's public schools. So what would EAI-run schools eliminate?

Some savings are realized through cuts in administrative staff. But INC. magazine reports that "stand-alone positions such as librarian, school nurse and phys-ed instructor are rolled into the job of a classroom teacher." At a time when we are trying to enhance student learning capabilities by reducing student-teacher ratios, EAI would increase teachers' non-instructional duties. Will that put children's health at risk? Will students with special needs be denied an education because the trained professionals they require would cost too much to hire? MEA believes it is not acceptable to cut costs by cutting services to any students.

In Winona, EAI suggested that great savings could be achieved by subcontracting food service, custodial services and transportation. Maybe savings could be realized, but is it moral and just to lay off workers -- to strip them and their families of modest wages, health insurance and retirement benefits so the schools can operate with replacements hired at minimum wage? For my money, I'd rather keep those so-called "savings" in local communities, not lining the corporate coffers of EAI.

Former St. Paul school superintendent David Bennett, now president of EAI, wrote in The American School Board Journal that "possibly the most compelling reason for private management (of schools) is the possibilities it holds for improving professional respect." He asks, "Shouldn't teachers have telephones, desks, computers, calling cards -- the accoutrements of all professionals in our society?"

The simple answer is, "of course they should." The more complex question is whether private, for-profit companies should be given public funds to use for testing theories on our children.

In the business world, airline companies cut routes that aren't profitable. Goods in Alaska and Hawaii cost more because merchants add shipping costs to the price of items. Damaged goods are discarded because they won't add to the company's profit margin.

Our public schools are run for the public good -- not to make a good showing in the stock market. In the case of public schools, our children -- not higher profits -- are the bottom line.