

Private Money for Public Education

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Posted by [Matthew McKnight](#)

For all the contention brought about by the O.W.S. protests, most observers and commenters agree that the movement's one success has been to shift the national conversation—inasmuch as there is one—to words like “poverty” and “inequality.” Still, since the early occupations, calls for the protesters to give specifics to underline their shouting have resounded. And in the months of occupation, the financial and political structures that created and support such drastic inequality have been widely reported on and scrutinized.

One, though—the privatization of public education, in the name of reform—has received less attention. On Monday, the Walton Family Foundation announced its plan [to donate twenty-five and a half million dollars](#) to the Knowledge is Power Program (K.I.P.P.), a national network of charter schools that many believe to be among the best in the nation. Surely, a lot of good can come from that amount of money. With its latest grant, the W.F.F. aims to “double the number of students attending K.I.P.P. public charter schools,” reaching fifty-nine thousand students by 2015. More broadly, the foundation, according to its press release, seeks to help K.I.P.P. “transform public education in our nation.”

But what is the nature of that transformation? In its Winter 2011 issue, *Dissent* magazine [published](#) an in-depth look into the control that three prominent foundations (Bill and Melinda Gates, Eli and Edythe Broad, and the Walton Family) exert over the substance, direction, and quality of education “reform.”

In that article, Joanne Barkan writes:

Whatever nuances differentiate the motivations of the Big Three, their market-based goals for overhauling public education coincide: choice, competition, deregulation, accountability, and data-based decision-making. And they fund the same vehicles to achieve their goals: charter schools, high-stakes standardized testing for students, merit pay for teachers whose students improve their test scores, firing teachers and closing schools when scores don't rise adequately, and longitudinal data collection on the performance of every student and teacher.

The education-reform methodology that Barkan describes can be seen in major school districts throughout the country, including New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. She concludes: “The imperious overreaching of the Big Three undermines democracy just as surely as it damages public education.” As many school districts —[and members of Congress](#)—push to privatize public education, the money and foundations behind such

crusades often gain considerable control and face little backlash if their plans fail.

More to the point, though, poverty poses difficult challenges for education in America, and as poverty figures grow, those challenges stand only to grow more complex. One wonders: Who are the nearly thirty thousand students that K.I.P.P. and the Walton Family Foundation hope to attract? Already, nearly eighty per cent of students populating K.I.P.P. schools qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch (the education reform movement's euphemism for "poor"). [A study conducted by Gary Miron](#), a professor at Western Michigan University, says that thirty per cent of K.I.P.P. students and forty per cent of its black male students leave the schools between grades six and eight. The study continues:

The departure of low-performing students helps K.I.P.P. improve its aggregate results. Unlike local school districts, K.I.P.P. is not replacing the students who are leaving. When a student returns to a traditional public school after the autumn head count, K.I.P.P. retains all or most of the money ... allocated for educating that student during that school year.

K.I.P.P. responded with its own [pair of studies](#) to rebut those findings: "Our impact estimates reflect the effect of ever having enrolled at K.I.P.P., even if a student subsequently withdraws" and "if struggling students who leave K.I.P.P. are replaced by incoming struggling students from other schools ... there will be no selection effects arising from attrition/retention." At the same time, the schools tend to admit fewer "late-entry" students than those who leave before graduating. The studies, commissioned by K.I.P.P. did not, however, respond to the claim that K.I.P.P. retains funds after a student leaves the school network.

Looking at charter schools in general, it is far from certain whether or not charters perform better than public schools. Studies by [Stanford University](#) (2009) and the [Institute of Education Sciences](#) (2010) have yielded mixed results when comparing the two. But, even such a comparison is too myopic. The better question: Why do some schools—or types of schools—perform better than others? Foundation grants—however much they might help one, or a particular set of schools—are neither sustainable nor scalable enough to address the growing inequalities in education.

So, at the very least, it's worth asking if, in doubling its student population in roughly three years (the network was founded in 1994), K.I.P.P. is biting off more than it can chew. But the dollars from the Walton Family Foundation don't only enable K.I.P.P.; they also contribute to the notion that private institutions—schools, hospitals, banks—universally perform better than public ones, an idea that feeds rhetoric and policies, but may ultimately make it more difficult for generations to climb out of poverty.

Update: K.I.P.P.'s public affairs director, Steve Mancini, points out that, based on a survey of all hundred and nine K.I.P.P. schools conducted yesterday, eighty per cent "lose funding immediately for students who leave during the school year," while the others only count students once a year and "would keep funding if students leave during the school year."

Second, K.I.P.P. schools receive public funds just as traditional neighborhood schools do and should not be considered to be "private schools." K.I.P.P. schools also receive philanthropic donations, and often in large sums, that help to fund professional development programs, building costs, and teachers' salaries.

The broader issue, though, is that however well the K.I.P.P. model works—and they do produce admirable

results—economic inequality reverberates through the American educational system. There are many more children in America who are unable to attend K.I.P.P. or other charter schools. The Walton Family Foundation donation aims to increase capacity, which may end up being wonderful for future K.I.P.P. students. But what is America to do with the other children?