Fifty Years Later:

Access to Education as an Avenue out of Poverty

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President Lyndon B. Johnson saw education as a critical way out of poverty. On April 11, 1965, he signed into law an often unrecognized but core component of his War on Poverty: the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA. Not only was this legislation intended to give poor children educational access but also to ensure that they would receive a quality education.

While many Americans are aware of LBJ’s War on Poverty, most probably do not know that he started out as a teacher at the Welhausen School in Cotulla, Texas – a Mexican-American school where he would become the principal. Long before he was a politician, he learned how important educational opportunity was for low-income and minority families. Toward the end of his presidency, he stated unequivocally his commitment to the value of education for all: “We believe, that is, you and I, that education is not an expense. We believe it is an investment.” (October 16, 1968).

First and foremost, the ESEA focused on improving the quality of schools for low-income and minority students throughout the country. Schools with a student population where 40% or more fell below the newly created Federal Poverty Line (FPL) were eligible for grants to promote improvements in the quality of education as a way of reducing the “achievement gap” between these schools and their more affluent
counterparts. That was Title I of the ESEA. Other titles provided funding for school libraries, for better remedial assistance, for research to improve the quality of education and educational training, for grants for foreign language programs, arts programs, and gifted student programs, and to help students with disabilities (through an amendment in 1966).

Access: LBJ saw that as the key to the future for those mired deep in the pit of poverty, especially children in public elementary and secondary schools. But that wasn’t all. Later in 1965 he championed the Higher Education Act (HEA), which was intended to open the doors of colleges and universities for those previously locked out. Together with the ESEA, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the HEA was meant to make equality of opportunity in America not a dream but a reality.

What a truly amazing idea! And it came from an American president. Being poor, being nonwhite, being female, being disabled – no such social characteristics should limit a young person’s options. Sadly, fifty years later, this nation and its leaders seem to have abandoned that profound goal of access for everyone. Now we are busy closing the doors for those same young people – at a disadvantage because of family income or race or ethnicity or gender or whatever – who were once provided a way out.

For years now, especially since the Reagan era, we have seen a continuing attack on public education. Wealthy people like the Koch brothers have poured millions of dollars into convincing the American people that public education is a farce, a vast failure, a waste of money. These critics say that it is uncaring tenured teachers who
have created the national crisis in education. As Teach for America propounds, all it takes to be a good teacher in a poor, underfunded, urban school is someone who really cares, regardless of what his or her degree or training may be. While a degree in education does not ensure that someone will be a good, much less an excellent teacher, neither does simply enthusiasm or idealism, especially when that someone is thrown into an unfamiliar and poverty-ridden environment.

Other assaults on public education concentrate on so-called freedom of choice. As the advocates of charter schools tell us, choice will make all the difference. Just give parents more choice, along with vouchers, and their kids will get the educations they deserve. So public education, which is in league with the teachers’ unions, is just another example of the failure of big government. A little choice combined with inspired and non-unionized, fresh college grads in classrooms will be the salvation of American education.

Is privatizing education – any more than privatizing anything else – really the answer to our problems? Just look at New Orleans, where the entire public school system has now been shifted into the hands of the private entrepreneurs running charter schools. The actual evidence on charter schools does not support that notion. At best, they do no worse than regular public schools. Yet schools are going the way of other public services that have been overwhelmed by the neo-liberal ethic. The mystique that private corporations can do so much better than government continues to grow. In truth, what is happening is that public money meant for education is slipping
into the pockets of corporations that care only about the bottom line: making money. Even nonprofit corporations can make money as long as it is not called “profit.”

I started college in August 1964, when those doors of access were just beginning to creak open a bit. Not only were we encouraged to go to college, but we were also told to dream big. The idea of someday being a college professor had never crossed my mind, and I can’t imagine that happening to someone like me even a few years earlier. Of course, what really helped us was how affordable public universities and colleges were then. When I entered the University of Illinois, the state subsidy covered 65% of the actual educational costs. My tuition there, as well as at Ohio State University where I taught for nearly thirty years, was under $300 a year – about $4,400 in 2013 dollars. If I were at Illinois now, my tuition would be at least $15,602 a year – and at Ohio State it would be $10,010. The easiest way to make public universities more “selective” is to make them less affordable by raising tuition and fees, as most have done dramatically for the past twenty-five years or so. University costs skyrocketed in the 1990s, following the Reagan era attacks on “big government” and the push to privatize anything and everything.

Much of the blame for the rise in tuition and fees is attributed to the salaries of professors. We also hear constant complaints about how little most professors teach these days. But that’s not the real story, and the same people who claim that the War on Poverty was a dismal failure are also responsible for these lies about the rise in educational costs.
Education in this country is being privatized at all levels, from K-12 through college. Just as we have seen greed sweep through other corporations, it has now swept through educational enterprises as well, leading to high administrative salaries and large inequities between bosses and workers. At all levels of education, there are more administrators than ever, and most get paid much more than the most important workers in these corporations: the teachers and professors. This is most striking at the university level, where well over half of all courses are now taught by contingent faculty. Not only are college football and basketball coaches paid obscene salaries, but so are far too many college presidents, provosts, and deans and their administrative entourages.

Here is reality: rather than overpaid, underworked professors being responsible for the inflation of tuition in the past twenty years, it is overpaid and underworked administrators. Matt Taibbi documented the stunning rise in administrative numbers and salaries in “Ripping off Young America: the College-Loan Scandal,” in Rolling Stone (August 15, 2013) – nearly a year before the New York Times finally discovered this same fact.

Fifty years ago, college was relatively affordable, especially public institutions. My tuition never went up during the four years I was at Illinois. Since I did well on standardized tests, I “earned” a state scholarship that covered my tuition and received a private scholarship that paid for my books. Summer and part-time jobs during the school year covered most of the rest of my expenses. The $1.50 an hour I earned
working at a psychology lab would be worth $10.94 now. Many of us were able to work our way through college then; now that is virtually impossible.

The most important change in financing higher education was a dramatic change in the level of state support. At Ohio State, the state subsidy covered over two-thirds of the actual costs of education through the 1980s. That started to change during the 1990s, the era of personal responsibility. College presidents like E. Gordon Gee at Ohio State began to fail at their primary job of keeping the costs of education affordable. Rather than working with the state legislature to keep the subsidy up, Gee accelerated the privatizing of Ohio State. The benefits for him were staggering. In 2013 (during his second tenure as president at OSU), his base salary was $830,439, along with a house, an allowance to manage the house and for entertaining, a car, an annuity, and a bonus. His total compensation was over $2,000,000 (Cleveland Plain Dealer, May 12, 2013) – and that didn’t include his income from corporate board memberships. But he was not alone. In fact, he was not even the highest-paid public university president in 2013.

Administrative bloat and salaries are only part of the equation. In order to attract students with resources through parents and loans, we also see new and plush student unions and recreation facilities that rival anything in the private sphere – all paid for through tuition and fees. Even athletic programs – which are supposed to be self-supporting – draw from general university revenues or lead to additional fees for students whether they go to games or not.

So it’s no wonder so many students leave college deep in debt – thousands and thousands of dollars of debt that they will spend long years paying off. My total
student loan debt was $1,500 when I graduated in 1968, and I only borrowed another $5,000 while finishing my PhD. Most of my graduate student loans were actually forgiven at 10% a year for each year I taught.

While it may be easier to see these profound changes at the higher education level, the same changes are happening at the K-12 level. Public schools been under attack for many years, leading to a steady decline in the public’s commitment to them. Support for education shows how much this country’s sense of the public welfare has faded, just as it has for other common needs, such as roads, bridges, sewers, and power lines. We continue to fund K-12 education largely through the antiquated method of property taxes, where large, urban school districts are more and more disadvantaged because of declining property values and tax abatements given to businesses. We see school levy after school levy fail at the ballot box. Yet, for better or worse, most children will go to and eventually graduate from a public school. How many alternative schools are available to and affordable for most parents?

So fifty years later, do we see education as an investment, as LBJ did? Perhaps, but only as an individual investment, not a societal obligation. As we make college more and more unaffordable, those doors of opportunity are quietly sliding shut for those most in need of that access. And we have seen the ESEA bastardized through reauthorization into “No Child Left Behind” rather than being a means out of poverty as originally intended.

There was a time when many saw education as LBJ did. There was a time when we as a nation were committed to the common good, where we believed – as Bruce
Springsteen sings – in taking care of our own. Rather than saying that times are different now than they were fifty years ago, we should embrace what we did then. After all, if we did it once, we can do it again. Why is that impossible now? There is absolutely no reason why we cannot do for today’s young people what was done for my generation. We have the resources. We must once again make access to education for all a national priority.