

**Derek W. Black, *Schoolhouse Burning: Public Education and the Assault on American Democracy* (PublicAffairs, 2020)**

Book Excerpt 1

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*The text below is a modified excerpt. The author tailored the text to be read on its own.*

The continued rapid expansion of vouchers and charters marks a major Rubicon for our democracy. As new voucher and charter bills lock in the privatization of education, they create the possibility of the permanent underfunding of public education. In doing so, they also roll back democratic gains and constitutional commitments that reach back to Reconstruction, when Congress insisted that public education be equal, uniform, open to all, and absolutely guaranteed in state constitutions. Those democratic commitments were tested again nearly a century later in the modern civil rights movement. Yet, as was the case during Jim Crow, the racist push to undermine African American citizenship could not manage the additional step of eliminating public education altogether.

Today's privatization movement, unlike Jim Crow and the civil rights backlash, strikes at public education itself. Troublingly, however, the political receptivity to these attacks on public education remains intertwined with race. A few pictures are worth a thousand words on this score.

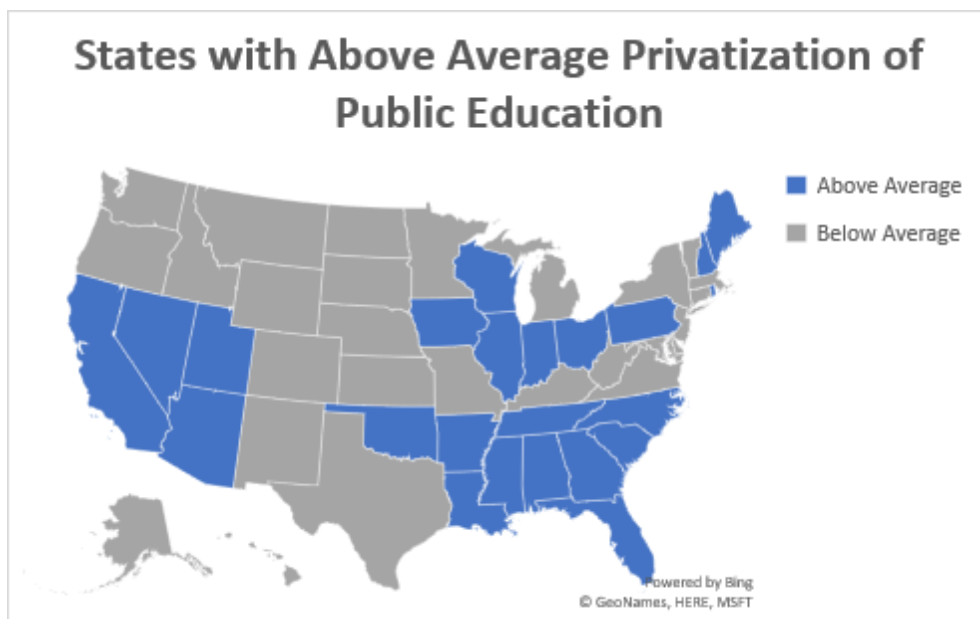
Drawing on empirical data collected by the Network for Public Education,<sup>1</sup> the first map below measures how much each state has privatized—or is open to privatizing—public education. Privatization, as measured on this map, means two things: (a) the existence of a voucher program (or some scholarship or tax credit variant) and the number of students the state is willing to give them to; and (b) the existence of charter schools, the ease of authorizing them, and how many students attend them.

The states in black are those that have above-average levels of privatization. Those states in grey are those with below-average levels of privatization. This grey group include both states that have resisted privatization and those that have not resisted privatization but are no more open to it than the average state. North Dakota, South Dakota, and Kentucky, for instance, have resisted voucher and charter expansion, whereas Texas has allowed privatization, just not to an enormous degree. All four of those states, however, appear in grey.

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<sup>1</sup> Tanya Clay House et al., *Grading the States: A Report Card on Our Nation's Commitment to Public Schools 8* (New York: Network for Public Education; Quincy, MA: Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2018), <http://schottfoundation.org/report/grading-the-states>

The map tells a global story that sadly aligns with the nation’s long-term racial and democratic stories. The Northeast, and Upper Midwest, and Northwest—the parts of America with the fewest racial minorities—have only suffered modest privatization. Their public school systems, for the most part, do not face major privatization threats. The rural mountain states of Kentucky and West Virginia reflect a similar story—primarily white and uninterested in privatization. But the Southeast—the Confederacy’s old stronghold—tells the exact opposite story: large percentages of African American students and, save one state, their public schools are facing deep privatization forces.



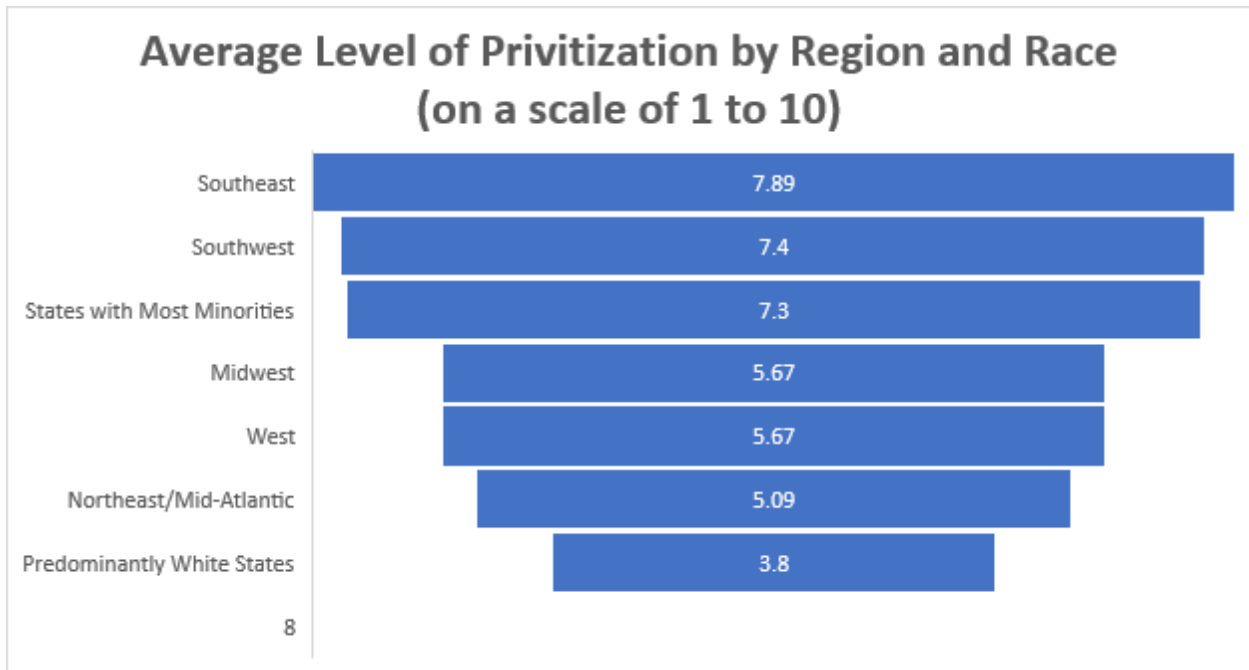
The map, however, does not capture the full depth of the distinction between these states. The next chart below goes a step further. It calculates each state’s openness to privatization on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most open to privatization. It then combines the results by geographic region, calculating each region’s openness to privatization. It does the same with race, combining the results from the ten states with the highest percentage of racial minorities and comparing them with the ten states with the highest percentage of whites. The Southeast is more open to privatization than any other region in the nation. In fact, its rating is 55 percent higher than the Northeast’s. Likewise, states with the highest percentages of minorities have twice the level of privatization as predominantly white states.

Public school funding, or the lack thereof, is the flipside of this privatization movement. One of the nation’s foremost school funding scholars, Bruce Baker, led a national study of what it would cost for students to achieve “average” outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Average outcomes are not the same as

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce D. Baker et al., *The Real Shame of the Nation: The Causes and Consequences of Interstate Inequity in Public*

adequate outcomes, proficiency, equality, or any other laudable goal we might pursue. Average means reaching the level that the average student is currently at—a level that many scholars and measures suggest is below adequate or proficient. The point of estimating the cost of average outcomes, though, is to remove subjectivity from the equation. Average does not require judgment calls or debates about what good education should look like. Relying on that notion, Baker and his colleagues identified the cost of achieving average outcomes and then measured that cost against the resources that are actually available to students across the country.



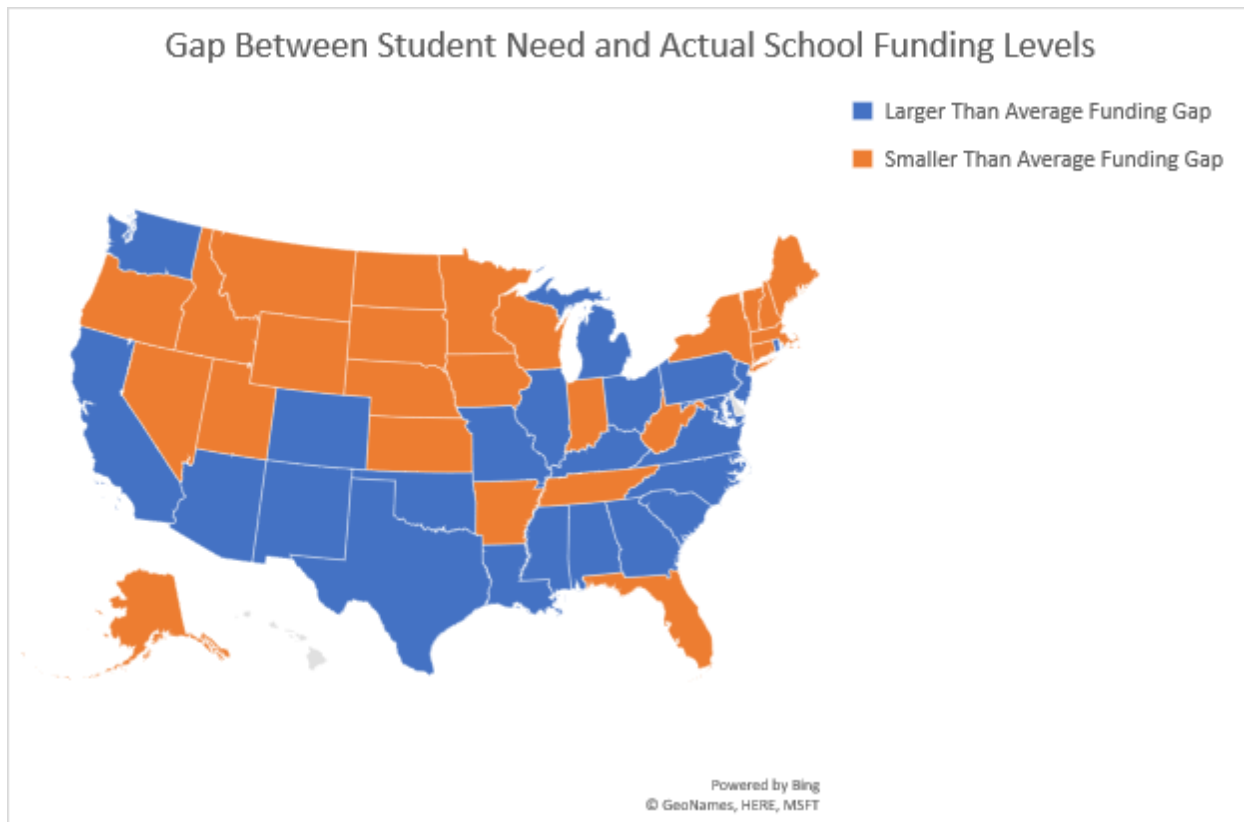
They found that when it comes to districts serving primarily middle-income students, most states provide those districts with the resources they need to achieve average outcomes. In fact, a lot of states spend several thousand dollars more per pupil more in these districts than they actually need. But only a couple of states provide districts serving predominantly poor students what they need. The average state provides districts serving predominantly poor students \$6,239 less per pupil than they need.

Accepting the fact for just one moment that nearly every state fails to provide its needy students with sufficient resources, the map below seeks to identify laggards within that overall insufficient system—those states with larger-than-average funding gaps in districts serving the poorest students. The picture this data paints matches the privatization picture pretty closely. The deepest and most consistent school funding gaps are in the Southeast and Southwest, with far smaller funding gaps in the Upper Midwest and Northeast.

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School Investments (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University; Philadelphia: Education Law Center, 2018), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cm6Jkm6ktUT3SQplzDFjly3G3iLW0tj/view>

These privatization and funding gap trends threaten to rob students in these particular states of their civic and economic futures. For instance, Raj Chetty and other researchers at Harvard performed a study of what you might call the American Dream—the extent to which lower-income children break the bonds of their families’ poverty and enter the middle or upper class.<sup>3</sup> Looking at real-life outcomes for children, they found that upward mobility or the lack thereof were largely a function of each state’s willingness to invest in its people through things like education, higher education, health, and welfare. Those investments, of course, were a function of tax revenues. The places where children had the smallest chance of upward mobility were heavily concentrated in the Southeast, particularly in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. In fact, the only geographic location within North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia where there was more than just the most minimal chance of upward mobility was in the mountain region (predominantly white) where those three states meet.



<sup>3</sup> Raj Chetty et al., “The Economic Impact of Tax Expenditures: Evidence from Spatial Variation across the U.S.,” IRS (2015), <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/14rpttaxexpenditures.pdf>; Raj Chetty et al., “Where Is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the U.S. States,” 129 (4) *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129 no. 4 (2014): 1553, 1591 (map printed in gray scale). Lighter colors = more absolute upward mobility, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w19843.pdf> (contains the colored map).

Outside the Southeast, the opportunity for upward mobility was far more prevalent, though not everywhere. In the far west in California, Nevada, and New Mexico, large zones of very low opportunity existed, but zones of more substantial opportunity could also be found. The Great Lakes states were similar to the far west states, with substantial pockets of low opportunity in urban centers but more opportunity outside of them. The very highest and most consistent levels of upward mobility, however, were in the so-called flyover states—from Wisconsin to Idaho and North Dakota to central Texas. Very few places of complete social immobility were found in these regions. In short, the study's measure of the American Dream, to no surprise, matches up with the above maps on privatization and public school funding gaps.

Yet, these maps are not just a retelling of our old racial history, and the victims are not just minority students. The move against public education may have begun and be winning in the same old places, but this time the attack presents a danger that has the capacity to sweep more broadly. In prior eras, the racial dimensions of attacks on public education obscured any threat to public education. That is not to say it was all about race. Southern plantation owners, for instance, wanted to retain political power at the expense of both blacks and lower- and middle-class whites. But in the mid- and late-1800s, race was the primary ideological wedge for resisting public education. Similarly, during the civil rights movement, race was the political wedge that gave the anti-education crowd strength. There was no serious appetite for deconstructing public education itself.

Today, race remains a powerful undercurrent fueling the notion that government spends too much money on other kids' education. But today, that undercurrent is more fractured and complicated. The radical libertarian movement is stoking the dissatisfaction of a more diffuse and diverse group of individuals to push its own agenda. Some of the most dissatisfied families are upset for the same reasons they were decades ago: public schools expose them to diversity, equity, and culturally sensitive issues they would rather avoid. Yet, a lot of other families are uncomfortable with public school because they sense, or are told, public schools are lacking in quality. That sense may be affected by subtle racial and other biases, but on the surface, it is articulated as a neutral question of academic quality. And dissatisfaction with the quality of education that families experience in public school—whether real or perceived—is a dissatisfaction not bound by race or socio-economic status. Many minority families are just as sympathetic to school choice as majority families are. Many poor families are just as sympathetic to school choice as wealthy ones.

The privatization movement promises all these families positive outcomes—liberty, freedom, and better education. Even if the promises are hollow, attacks on public education in prior eras could not muster a plausible positive justification. Prior attacks were more about maintaining the status quo than offering families something new or better. In this way, a direct, yet more positive, attack on public education is also more dangerous. It draws on a larger constituency. It is not obviously mean-spirited. This allows it to masquerade with a degree of legitimacy that it previously lacked. This also means public education could go out with a whimper, not a bang. Only after the fact would many realize what had happened.

## Black, *Schoolhouse Burning* • NCSPE Book Excerpt

These fundamental challenges to public education force us to ask whether public education can survive once again, and, if it does not, will democracy be irreparably damaged?

Taking the long view of history in my book *Schoolhouse Burning*, I express the belief that public education will survive, though just surviving is no more comforting than education's survival would have been to African Americans living through the damage that Jim Crow did to their lives and society as a whole. Education's survival, then and now, can mean as little as the capacity for schools to exist and democracy to rise once again at a later date. Survival does not mean that education—or democracy—remains on solid ground in the interim. And to be clear, my belief that education will survive is based on the past, which we know is not a conclusive predictor of the future.

The current trajectory of public education remains troubling. Education and political leaders at the very highest levels still aim to do public education harm. They still manage to pass major pieces of legislation that do just that. They still manage to ward off political movements that would repair public education. They, for the most part, still hold the keys to government power. Their tactics, in some instances, have grown harsher, more manipulative, and even vindictive toward those who defend public education.

Yet, one potential enduring truth in the unraveling of American norms in recent years is that public education, for whatever reason, may be less fragile than our other democratic norms. It has been under assault just as much as any of our norms, maybe more. It has suffered just as many blows, maybe more. But average Americans won't let go of public education. In other words, public education, due to its unique status in our democracy, may be an exception to the country's overall political trends.

In *The People vs. Democracy*, Yascha Mounk details the populist uprising that has swept the United States and other countries. The populist majority insists that democratic principles entitle it to set its own rules, even if those rules conflict with historical and constitutional norms. If a popular majority favors an autocrat or dislikes the results that democratic norms and constitutional rights require, the popular majority insists its immediate preferences should trump norms. Our constitutional democracy has never operated that way, but current events too often reflect a new reality—and public education tracked that reality for the better part of a decade.

Over the past decade, newly elected politicians denigrated and undermined public education. They regularly failed to ensure constitutionally adequate and equal education and, sometimes, even breached more explicit and straightforward constitutional commands. As new political majorities took or consolidated power at the state level, they felt empowered to redefine public education as they saw fit. Many political leaders thought voters' desire for educational improvement was a desire or sympathy for abandoning public education. Other political leaders thought the loudest voices for tax cuts and school choice were also the voices of the people. The education resistance is now showing those leaders were mistaken. Public education is at least one institution the populist revolt has no desire to tear down. That fact suggests that public education may very well be both the practical and ideological foundation upon which our democracy still rests, even as the rest of democracy sometimes looks like it is crumbling.

Does that then mean that the public education resistance portends something else positive for democracy? I dare not speculate. Public education has always represented the idea of America, not its reality. No doubt, we want reality to match the education idea. An idea, if that is all it ever becomes, is not worth a hill of beans. And the idea of public education has been about creating tangible benefits for everyday people—even if it has not ended inequality. But the power of public education owes just as much, if not more, to the idea it represents.

Public education represents a commitment to a nation in which a day laborer's son can go to college, own a business, maybe even become president. It represents a nation in which every person has a stake in setting the rules by which society will govern itself, where the waitress's children learn alongside of and break bread with the senator's and CEO's children. Public education represents a nation where people from many different countries, religions, and ethnic backgrounds come together as one for a common purpose around common values.

We know that the idea has never been fully true in our schools, but we need to believe in that idea. That idea is part of what makes us America. The pursuit of that idea, both in fact and in mind, has long set us apart from the world. Pursuing that idea still captures the American imagination today. It involves 10,000 school districts serving 50 million students for the lion's share of their waking lives between the ages of five and eighteen. Those schools fail as often as not to live up to the American idea, but they connect parents, families, teachers, students, and the general public to public education in ways that are not just about historical pomp, circumstance, and rhetoric. These experiences and the ideas behind them are not nearly as easy to break as the economy, political process, or other norms.