

Education, Choice and Change

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Distinguished Professor at Marquette University and Chair of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), Howard Fuller has long been a noted black power advocate, community organizer, and civic leader. As Superintendent of the Milwaukee Public School District in the 1990's, he created the first publicly funded school voucher program in the nation. In this edited version of remarks at the High Tech High GSE Speaker Series, Dr. Fuller shares his views on education in America, focusing on issues of race, choice, participation, and power. The interviewer is Larry Rosenstock of High Tech High. A video of the event is available at <http://howtovideos.hightechhigh.org/video>.

INTERVIEWER

Our schools are now more segregated than they were at the time of Brown v. Board of Education. What is your take on the question of separate but equal?

HF

I believe that our children are our most precious gift from God, and that it is our responsibility, with God's guidance, to love them, nurture them, and make sure that every single one of them is educated. As an African-American, there's this haunting thought that sears my soul—that forty years ago, four students from North Carolina A&T sat down at a lunch counter and demanded to be served. And today, forty years later, we've got students who can sit down at a lunch counter where they are welcome, and they can't read the menu. I ask myself, how did we allow this to happen?

For me, education is literally about the continuation of our democracy. In the foreword to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaw states that the real purpose of education is to give young people the skills and the capacity to engage in the practice of freedom, which really means to engage in the transformation of their world. Meanwhile, in *The World Is Flat*, Tom Friedman says that every day in Africa a gazelle gets up, and it knows that if it can't run faster than the fastest lion, it's going to get killed. Every day a lion gets up knowing that if it can't run faster than the slowest gazelle, it's going to starve. Either way, when the sun comes up, they're both running. All over this world, when the sun comes up, young people start running. And young people all over this world are running faster than our "best prepared" young people. If that is the case, what chance do our young people have who can't read, can't write, can't think, can't compute, can't analyze? What chance do they have to engage in the practice of freedom?

As for separate but equal, there was a huge debate in the NAACP about *Plessy v. Ferguson*, because there were black people who—I want to say this as politically incorrectly as I can—who didn’t want to be with white people. So their thing was, “Hey, if there’s a way for us to be equal, and we don’t have to be with them, let’s pursue equal.” But it was clear that pursuing “equal” in that framework was a pipe dream in America.

You’re talking to a person who had to drink out of the “colored” bubbler and had to sit in the back of the bus. If we wanted to go to the movies in Shreveport, Louisiana, we had to go around to the back and go up the steps and sit in the balcony. Still, for most black people, the reason to push for school integration was, “We want a better education for our kids.” It wasn’t necessarily that blacks wanted to be with white people. It was that in order to get a great education for their kids, they had to end the system of racial apartheid that buttressed the system of white supremacy.

The Brown decision was revolutionary in its time. But if you read Footnote 11 of Brown I, you’ll see the social science literature that backed up the statement that if something is all black, it is by definition inferior. And so Brown was an important step, but because of the way it was framed, what ultimately happened was that the burden of desegregation was put on the backs of black children. And we were bused all over the place and our communities were torn asunder. A decision that was supposed to benefit us did so in some respects, but in other respects, it did not.

In *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South*, Adam Fairclough talks about the tensions that black people experienced when black institutions were closed. You can’t romanticize those institutions in a segregated America, but still you have to understand the impact of coming in and saying, “Your stuff is inferior, by definition—because it’s all black.” What made it inferior was that white people controlled it; white people kept us from getting resources. It wasn’t inferior because it was inhabited by black people.

The debate continues today. I’m a strong supporter of the charter school movement. But I also think that because education is tied to liberation, it is crucial that we have some high-performing institutions that are led by people of color, and that these people of color have to get access to some of the same level of resources that KIPP gets, for example. Unless this charter movement creates space for black and Latino and Native American people to create high-performing institutions for their children, *led* by us, then this movement is going to fail, because ultimately people cannot be liberated by other people.

Ted Sizer made it possible for me to be an Annenberg Fellow. Ted, Dennis Littky, Debbie Meier and I went around the country for two years, visiting schools and arguing. I used to argue with Debbie all the time, first about charter schools, and then about choice, which Debbie didn't buy. I think the problem is that people always want to make it one or the other. If you ask me, what do I want for my kids, my answer would be, I want a great teacher. I don't care what their race is—I want a great teacher. But in order to be a great teacher one has to establish a relationship with students. And so, if you're a white person, you're a white person. And tomorrow you'll be a white person, and yesterday you were, and so you can't act with the students like you ain't white. You have to be who you are, but that should never prevent you from understanding who your students are and having a relationship with them based on respect for who they are.

We do need people of color working with kids of color. It is critical for those kids to see people who look like them who can help them become what we want them to be. But anybody who says that merely because you're black or Latino, you can teach black or Latino kids better, that's insane. This is not only about race, it's about class. Just because you are the same color doesn't mean you can relate to all kids, especially if you don't want to be with them, and you're ashamed of them. Here's an example. A drunk white dude gets on the bus and there are white people and black people on the bus, and the white people on the bus say, "This is a fool. He's drunk." If a drunk black dude gets on the bus, all the black people's heads go down, because this means the whole race is being defined by this one dude, because we know that America is going to look at our whole race based on this one dude. We're ashamed of certain things because of the way that we've been socialized. And so if you've got that kind of attitude, how are you going to really relate to some of these young people, who are coming out of circumstances that many of us can't even fathom, let alone actually live through. And if you can't really deal with that, how are you going to teach them?

I know there are those who say that we're in a post-racial America. And at some point I know someone is going to explain to me what that is exactly, so I can know how to function, because I'm still kind of caught up in thinking this race thing is still a problem.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of arguing with Debbie, Diane Ravitch has now come out in opposition to charter schools. Ninety-seven percent of the kids in the U.S. are not in schools of choice. This school is a school of choice; your school, CEO Leadership Academy, is a school of choice. There is a

state rep in Harlem who is very opposed to charters there, even though he went to a school of choice himself. He says that if you take children out of a burning building, you're still leaving other children in that burning building. So what about this question of the effect of choice on non-choosers?

HF

I was in Eva Moskowitz's school, Harlem Success Academy, up four flights in one of those buildings, and once you got up there, the difference from what was happening on these other floors was astounding. I was there for the admissions lottery. There were like 8,000 people in this auditorium, hoping that their child was going to be one of the 300. Isn't this like a crime, that you have to have a lottery for poor parents to find a good school for their kids?

But let me answer the question this way. At the New York Times editorial board, a woman on the board was on me, because I support vouchers. And I was trying to be cool and reasonable, you know, because I'm at the *New York Times*, but finally, I said to her, "Look, lady. I don't know you. I don't know if you've got any children, but I'll bet if you've got some, they're not in school in the South Bronx. And you're telling me that you can't support vouchers because it doesn't save all the kids?"

I've got a Harriet Tubman view of the world. Harriet Tubman got up every day saying, "I want to end slavery. But in the meantime, I'm going to rescue every slave that I can." So I get up every day saying, I want the whole system to be better. And I do. But in the meantime, if we can create CEO Leadership Academy, or High Tech High, or KIPP Academy, or Uncommon Schools, or Achievement First, whatever we can create that will save kids while we're trying to make this whole thing better, then we have a moral responsibility to do that, because you have no idea what that one kid that you've saved will mean to the world.

We have heroic teachers and administrators who care as deeply about kids as anyone, teaching every day in traditional public school systems. The issue is not these teachers—although you all know we've got people teaching who shouldn't be teaching nobody's children, ever, period, and you ought to be able to get rid of them. When I was a superintendent, I had a teacher put a kid's head in a soiled toilet, and the union said that this was a good teacher who had a *bad day*, and they arbitrated and won, and forced us to put this teacher, not only back in the district, but back in that school. So I've got stories about why I believe that you have to have something different for our kids.

But here's my point. We all ought to get up every day saying every child deserves a quality education. The question is, on a given day, what stops that from happening? In many situations you have good people that are caught in a dysfunctional system. And so if I criticize the system, does that mean that I'm against public education? Of course not—only an idiot thinks that way. We need to make a distinction between public education, which is a concept, and the system that delivers it, which is a mechanism. And just as you've got that mechanism, you can create another mechanism that would be more effective in making sure that all kids learn.

This is the argument that I had with Debbie Meier and, now, Diane Ravitch. I believe that you can never be committed to an *arrangement*, but you have to be committed to purpose. And if you're committed to *purpose*, you can be for a lot of different arrangements to get to purpose. At this point in history, I think charter schools provide a mechanism that helps us with the purpose, but ten years from now, if they're not working, we ought to get rid of them. And we shouldn't be supporting charter schools right now that are lousy schools, just because they're charter schools. That's ridiculous. We should support schools that work for kids, wherever they are, however they get formed.

INTERVIEWER

You've experienced life in an urban district from the inside. Can you say something about what might be done about the district delivery mechanism?

HF

Yeah—Katrina. Many of us wake up every day saying, we've got to blow this up. And with all the human tragedy and hurt and pain that people went through because of Katrina, Katrina actually did blow it up. We need to pay very close attention to what is being rebuilt in New Orleans. This opportunity came with terrible consequences. Don't we owe it to those kids—and to ourselves—to construct something that would actually work for the kids?

I believe that many districts are not redeemable in their current form. I'm concerned that the same people that led us on the race to the bottom are getting ready to get money to lead us on the race to the top. And nothing fundamental is going to change. Differentiated pay and all that? That is not going to fundamentally change these districts.

We need institutions that can make changes quickly to deal with the needs of the kids that we

now have with us. And districts don't operate in terms of what's in the best interests of kids. They operate in terms of what's in the best interests of adults. You've seen the lawyer from the National Education Association on YouTube who was retiring, and he gets up and says that the power of the NEA is not about our good ideas about kids, it's because you all give us millions of dollars to exercise power. Yes, it's important that we do this and that for kids, he says, but if in order to do what's right for kids, if it requires that we give up on our rights to bargain, then that is too high a price to pay. He laid it out very clearly: at the end of the day, it ain't about them—it's about us.

Again, there are heroic people in there doing heroic things, but the way the system is constructed—the rules, the regulations, the contractual provisions—everybody is organized to protect their interests in these districts except kids. And as long as you have something that's constructed in that way, it will never be able to radically change in a way that will meet the needs of the vast majority of our kids

AUDIENCE

What's your view of common national standards?

HF

Part of me recoils from that whole notion, but another part of me understands how this happened, because of the difference in levels of education that various kids get depending on what states they're in, what cities they're in, and so forth. So I'm torn, because I see a reason to have them, and I see a reason not to have them. But it's just like I'm torn about testing. I understand the problem with testing, but what I also know is that at least in the near term, if our kids are not prepared to deal on some of these tests, they're not going to get into really great schools. They're going to be consigned to the lowest rung in America, and I can be mad about it, but I know I'm going to do the kids a disservice if I act like this is not important, or it's not going to impact their lives.

We should have common national standards for access. There was a meeting of all the major funders of the charter movement, and they invited all of the "key practitioners," but there wasn't a single Latino person in the room. The only two black people in the room were Jim Shelton, from Gates, and me. So we all went around the room to say what is the major problem in the charter movement. When it came to me, I said, "Look at this room. What's the major problem? Look at this room. Many of the kids that are being served are black and

Latino kids. And they've got no representation at the table where critical decisions are being made, and this is OK? I'm sorry—this ain't OK.” And I just can't live with it. But somebody told me that's just because I'm old school. So I went out and bought an iPhone. Maybe if I'm on Facebook and Twitter and I've got an iPhone, you all will let me in.

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