

Contemporary Politics of Education Management Organizations

Introduction

Education Management Organizations (EMOs) have been seen as controversial throughout their history by many players in the education world; there exists support and opposition around the notion of privatization in education. The growth of EMOs has been steady since the early 90s and has paralleled the growth of charter schools; however, they have been allowed into only few settings and have not even been considered in other settings (Hentschke, Oschman & Snell, 2002). As EMOs continue to grow, it is important to look at the political context of these issues. The impact of these management organizations on the ground level with parents, students, teachers and communities should be taken into account when making policy decisions that will either allow for expansion or decrease their presence. The following section will explore the major players in this issue and the political barriers in place that might limit growth of EMOs as well as opportunities for change within the movement of the for-profit management companies in schools.

Major Actors/ Big Coalitions

Hentschke et al. (2002) speak of the parties on both sides of the privatization controversy. They see this political contest as a dispute between professional reformers, who are mostly educationists, and radical reformers who include business leaders and community activists. Supporters of for-profit Education Management Organizations see the possibilities within a system to make money, but also to give students choice and the opportunity to attend better schools. Helen F. Ladd (2002) writes, "Supporters of market-based reforms also argue that the reforms will help to promote innovation and eliminate inefficiencies caused by bureaucratic red tape. Giving schools more flexibility is a goal of the site-based management programs in many public school systems..."

Early investors saw the potential for market based practices to provide meaningful reform in education while earning a profit for investors. A former investor in Edison Learning Inc., from when the company was publicly traded gives insight into the attraction to private management. The investor explains, “The idea appealed to me, the idea that they could get enough schools to buy into this and they were committed as I am too, to creating more choice for students.” (Anonymous Investor, Personal communication, November, 17, 2009) Investing in education was unique at this time and this investor took advantage of its entrepreneurial spirit.

EMOs have held support in the past from Republican politicians, radicalized education activists, and African American and Latino community leaders, all dissatisfied with the current public education system, (Wilson, 2006). EMOs represented a way to make schools more efficient, to increase innovation and to increase competition leading to better results for all schools (Levin 2002). Chester E. Finn, President of the Thomas B. Ford Foundation spoke of his support of and participation in the Edison Project (now known as Edison Learning) in an article entitled, “Will Privatization Save Public Schools?” from the Harvard Ed. Magazine. The group he worked with saw this as the opportunity to create the ideal school, untainted by the government. He was paid to “brainstorm the perfect school design”, this design included a reading curriculum called Success For All, monthly computer based assessments, 90 minutes of professional development and a longer 8 hour school day, (Pollard, 2002). In essence one might not object to the amenities of a school with a vision as stated, but many more issues and conflicts arise with the concept of a for-profit education management company.

Just as supporters have reasons for their commitment to EMOs, those that oppose for-profit management companies also have reasons for doing so. Cooper and Randall (2008) argue that the status quo of the educational system is being questioned as education management

companies hope to privatize the system. They explain, “For more than 150 years, public education has enjoyed a virtual hegemony (with local, state, and federal support), so now leaders of public education (and its supporters) most fear that private alternatives will break or weaken this control. Like all monopolies, the one thing they fear is competition and consequently, loss of the market or a major share or segment of the market.”(pp. 210-211) This can be equated to a fear of change and a major reason why districts are not willing to contract with EMOs.

Oppositional forces of EMOs also fear that privatization will increase cost cutting, examples include hiring inexperienced teachers, not providing transportation, and recruiting less costly students (Miron, 2008). Critics think that the extra cost cutting will benefit investors but will leave students behind. Teachers unions including the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association are all examples of the opposition to EMOs. The National Education Association expresses opposition of privatization as they worry that for-profit companies can endanger the quality of education for children and worries that the accountability system of current schools may be avoided in privately run and operated public schools (Cooper and Randall, 2008).

The coalitions that get the most public attention supporting and opposing EMOs have been mostly those with social capital and power; it is important to remember that those working in schools should also be involved in this discussion. The voices of teachers and parents and public constituents of districts have had the power in the past to sway the political district leanings on this topic (Miner, 2002). Anna Weiss, a teacher who previously worked at an Edison school in Philadelphia explains her experience, “We felt as if we were in a sort of underdog position compared to school district schools. It was a sort of unspoken message that EMO schools were the worst of the lot, shunted off to outside organizations by the district and a sort of

‘redheaded stepchild’ if you will.” She continues on to speak of how she did not have the fundamental materials to do her job and often had to spend time and resources finding these materials on her own. While this is the voice and opinion of only one teacher and her negative experience with EMOs, she can represent an example of oppositional forces on this topic. Because EMOs are trying to create brands, they commit to using a standardized curriculum across schools, yet two teachers who worked at an Edison school in Philadelphia commented that they did not have curriculum given to them, and they were forced to try to borrow curriculum from others who worked in regularly run district schools (Personal communication, November, 17, 2009). A parent voice for Philadelphia public schools known as Parents United, vehemently opposes EMOs in the Philadelphia school district. They write, “We are appalled at the crass and blatant intrusion of politicians, Wall Street, and EMO executives to influence what should be an academic decision” (Parents United, 2009). Community members in Philadelphia are not happy with the influx of EMOs in their schools. Weiss comments, “Parents were especially virulently against Edison Schools--they much preferred the old principal, who was seen as someone who was from the neighborhood and therefore part of the community” (Anna Weiss, Personal communication, November 17, 2009). The impact of EMOs managing schools varied and not all schools that are privately managed function as this one did, but this can serve as an example of oppositional forces, how they are developed, and the negative effects that could have been avoided.

Political Barriers

Upon reflection, the investor mentioned earlier recognizes barriers to the success of EMOs that she failed to notice upon initial investment years ago. She acknowledges that local politics play a huge part in the possible success of EMOs; people do not like the idea of “making

a buck on a kid” and knowing that these organizations are for-profit raises concerns for many who think this may be more valued than the actual education and school (Anonymous Investor, Personal communication, November, 17, 2009). She also recognized that the philosophy of a one-size-fits-all school manifested in a uniform, purchased curriculum did not work and was too much of a “hammer with a blunt force” (Anonymous Investor, Personal communication, November, 17, 2009). Hentschke et. al second the argument that is associated with “assumptions about inherent motivation and suspected behavior of profit-seeking businesses”. People assume that for-profit companies take money away from kids and put it into their pockets. Overcoming this suspicion is necessary for furthering the growth of EMOs and for a chance at acceptance of these organizations on a more widespread scale.

Another large barrier to EMO groups is the removal of the control of financial resources, along with staffing authority from local education officials (Hentschke et.al, 2002). As there has been complete control of public schools by these officials giving up that power could be difficult and people have shown apprehension in doing so. The general public also does not want to give up on the belief in public education (Wilson, 2006). Terry M. Moe is referenced in Wilson (2006), *Learning on the Job*, as he explains that people see the public school system as “an expression of local democracy and a pillar of the local community, they admire the egalitarian principles on which it is based, [and] they think it deserves our commitment and support.” Although there are supports that create a good argument for the necessity of EMOs in our current system it seems that without more changes in their current structures and an increase in public opinion the political will may not change.

Opportunities For Change

While there are many barriers and oppositional forces in the realm of Education Management Organizations, there are also supporters and examples of progress in these market based reforms. The concern of the public that companies and Wall Street are making money off of children and possibly limiting resources at these schools in order to make a profit brings to light a valid anxiety. If schools were more upfront with constituents, parents and policy makers maybe these fears would lessen. National Heritage Academies, although sometimes viewed as blurring the line between church and state, have reached out to communities and created an open environment, “a parents’ room” in their schools for parents to meet with staff, plan events, or even just have a cup of coffee (Wilson, 2006). This openness and deliberate attention to the importance of community could be an example for many EMOs that struggle to build alliance and coalitions. SABIS, a globally managed for-profit from Beirut Lebanon has opened schools in the United States and specifically their school in Springfield, MA has shown impressive results. On the school website they boast of their recognition from US News and World Report as one of America’s Best High Schools based on standardized test scores, Proficiency rates of all students, including the least advantaged and challenging college-ready curriculum (SABIS, 2009). Making public these results and creating more of a learning community between different EMOs could strengthen their effectiveness and create more political will to continue on this road of growth, despite the challenges faced in the past.