

Bill Gates and the Push to Privatize Public Education

An Interview With Mercedes K. Schneider



Mercedes Schneider

by SETH SANDRONSKY, [Counterpunch](#)

Mercedes K. Schneider holds degrees in secondary education (English and German), guidance and counseling, and applied statistics and research methods. She is finishing her 19th full-time year of teaching, 14 of which have been as a certified teacher in the traditional public school classroom. Schneider lives in her native southern Louisiana and blogs on education issues at [deutsch29.wordpress.com](#). Information Age Publishing just released Schneider's first book, [A Chronicle of Echoes: Who's Who in the Implosion of American Public Education](#), which is climbing in popularity on [Amazon](#). Her book unpacks the whys and wherefores of the groups and people propelling the corporate assault on the nation's public K-12 schools. She and I conducted this interview via email.

Seth Sandronsky: Talk about who you are and the actors (family influences) and factors (class interests) that produced Mercedes K. Schneider today.

Mercedes K. Schneider: One major influence on my development was my father. He thought I was smart and strong, and he told

people so in front of me. He also enjoyed conversing with me about history and politics (he served in World War II under Army General George Patton). He died when I was only 12 (today happens to be the 34th anniversary of his funeral), but his influence on me during my formative years was undeniable. He allowed me to work part time at an early age (11 years). He also allowed me to pursue my varied interests despite their unusualness. For example, I had a Honda CT 70 minibike, and I remember sitting on our patio cleaning the carburetor as he watched. I also rebuilt bicycles and sold them and repaired appliances. He was clearly proud of me.

Another major influence was my teachers. I am a product of public schools and state universities. So many of my teachers took obvious pleasure in my abilities. I am able to function well in both math and English. I did not know until I was an adult that functioning well in both is unusual.

***SS:** In *A Chronicle of Echoes: Who's Who in the Implosion of American Public Education*, you investigate and reveal the corporate actors and factors driving school reform: "The primary motivation behind this destruction is greed." How does that motive work in politics?*

MKS: One of the best examples of greed driving the political process is the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). Corporations pay thousands of dollars annually to belong to ALEC, but legislators pay \$100. Legislators are then "scholarshipped" to attend conventions that second as appealing vacations.

ALEC's corporate members foot the bill in exchange for legislators' taking corporate-benefiting "model legislation"—including education legislation—back to their districts. All are happy: ALEC's corporate members increase profits via legislation designed to protect the profit motive; legislators receive "perks" such as nice vacations called "conventions" and they get to take credit for the model

legislation. Thus begins a cycle of corporations and legislators “helping” each other to serve their own selfish purposes in a twisted mockery of democracy.

SS: Describe your awakening to the perils of K-12 public school reform.

MKS: In October 2011, my principal was concerned about the upcoming state board of education (BESE) elections. A number of candidates were in favor of “reforms” such as teacher evaluations based upon student test scores and charter takeover of schools deemed “failing” based upon an imposed school letter grade system. My principal told me that if the “reform” candidates gained a majority in on the state education board, we (public education) were in trouble. I remember his words sinking in.

In my Chiefs for Change chapter, I write about Florida GOP Gov. Jeb Bush’s role in influencing the 2011 BESE elections. The out-of-state money bought the election: <http://www.thenation.com>

SS: The Chicago Teachers Union and city residents fought back against top-down reform in 2011. What is the response of the reformers?

MKS: The “reformers”—chiefly the one wielding the control (the goal of corporate reform is to centralize control, preferably in a single individual) is the mayor, Rahm Emanuel. His “response” was to close 49 public schools and later open 7 new charters, which, according to the Chicago Tribune, keeps the number of charters opening “on schedule”: <http://articles.chicagotribune.com/>

Thus, conversion of Chicago Public Schools into a privatized system continued.

SS: Organized labor has been on the receiving end of a one-sided upper class attack for decades. What is the leadership

of national teacher unions (not) doing to resist this trend?

MKS: The leadership of both national unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have bought into the corporate reform “experiment.” Thus, those attacking the national unions really haven’t done their homework. Both AFT and NEA are attempting to pull their memberships in the direction of corporate reform. No issue illustrates this better than the diehard allegiance of both AFT and NEA to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Both AFT and NEA have accepted millions from noted CCSS funder, [billionaire Bill Gates](#), to develop “CCSS-aligned” lessons (NEA) and “work on CCSS” (AFT).

Both AFT and NEA have locals that are also a members of the group, Teachers Union Reform Network (TURN), a group that states the following as [its goal](#):

TURN’s intended goal is to explore, develop, and demonstrate models that lead to the restructuring of unions so that they will become more responsive and responsible in organizing around projects designed to improve student learning.

Gates supports the “reform” of unions. He has paid \$3.5 million to TURN under the heading, [Consortium for Educational Change](#)

Gates calls this “advancing teaching and learning through labor-management collaboration.”

Keep in mind that Gates approaches organizations that he views will follow his wishes and [offers them his money](#).

In sum, the “one sided attacks” on both national teachers unions is idiocy on the part of the “upper class”— those chiefly promoting education privatization.

What are the national unions doing? Taking the corporate reform money and carrying out the privatization bidding. The

actions of both national union presidents read more like privatizing reformer actions than union president actions.

SS: Filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan and Michelle Rhee, past chancellor of public schools in DC, and current head of the advocacy group StudentsFirst, are joining forces to advance the case for reforming U.S. public education. Talk about the role of the media and public school reform.

MKS: In my book, *A Chronicle of Echoes*, I wrote two chapters on Michelle Rhee and her so-called “reforms.” She “taught” for one year unassisted, and according to her test score expectations as DC Chancellor, she would have had to fire herself. Then there is the suspicious “investigation” into the DC test erasures also detailed in my book.

Corporate reform wields power via the billions in corporate and “philanthropic” money at its disposal. Media is dependent upon those billions; as such, the message promoted in the mainstream media is often a pro-privatization message. The exploding popularity of social media as a means to communicate the reality of the failure of data-driven “reform” attests to the failure of the mainstream media to ethically rise to the occasion.

When it comes to ticket sales of Rhee-promoted “parent trigger” film, *Won’t Back Down*, however, America told Rhee what it thought of parent takeover of a “failing” school: [Box Office Mojo](#) ranked the movie as having the worst opening since 1982 out of movies that saturated 2,500-plus theaters.

Rhee’s StudentsFirst still tried to push the movie onto lawmakers by enticing them with beer and food. [No go](#).

SS: The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are sweeping the nation. Explain what the CCSS are, and the motives of the people and groups pushing them.

MKS: Though I have one chapter on CCSS “lead architect” David

Coleman in *A Chronicle of Echoes*, I plan to write a book on CCSS this summer. The CCSS “arrangement” is quite the deep well. However, allow me to offer a very abbreviated explanation here.

It seems that 46 (likely 45 states and DC) governors and state education superintendents signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for CCSS in 2009. So, to say that CCSS is now “sweeping the nation” implies a current decision to adopt. What is “sweeping the nation” now is the awareness that CCSS is an ill-fitting, inflexible trap that was chosen for each of 46 states by two individuals in 2009, before there was even a federal Race to the Top (RTTT, part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009) to tie CCSS to, and before CCSS was even created.

In short, what is happening now is that the American education stakeholders (teachers, parents) are realizing that they have been had, that those couple of privileged, powerful individuals whose lives are not directly touched by the public school classroom have signed away those classrooms for the sake of sameness, of standardization—and of the possibility of federal money.

CCSS is an unprecedented experiment. Bill Gates, the man who has pumped at least \$2.3 billion into CCSS (Georgia State University Professor Jack Hassard’s calculation) has admitted in different interviews documented by both education blogger Anthony Cody and by Washington Post education writer Valerie Strauss that CCSS (and other Gates-funded education reforms) is an experiment. Furthermore, in an American Enterprise Institute interview, Gates notes that he believes CCSS is important because “scale is good for free-market competition.”

An excellent education experience for students is not the ultimate goal of CCSS. Enabling large scale standardization of public education in order to market education as a product on a national scale (including curriculum, assessments, and

teacher training and ongoing professional development) is.

CCSS is a rigid anchor to which mega-corporations such as Pearson, “the world’s leading learning company,” might construct the profoundly profitable, national education experience for the masses. (Note: CCSS is not for the elite. The children of privilege—those attending schools that cost \$35,000-plus per year, for instance—are exempt).

The National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) are the copyright holders of CCSS. In signing the CCSS MOU, governors and state education superintendents have agreed to not alter CCSS. Thus, the “states” have agreed to forego any future “state leading” away from CCSS, and they did so before CCSS was even created. “States” can add some content to CCSS but cannot remove content.

The twisted premises behind CCSS is that standardizing education for the masses is both possible and good, and that the profit-driven “market forces” will benefit public education. Some principal promoters of CCSS are former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Fordham Institute President Chester Finn and Executive Vice President Mike Petrilli, AFT President Randi Weingarten, NEA President Dennis van Roekel, and Education Trust CEO Kati Haycock.

None of these individuals has children subjected to CCSS. None is a classroom practitioner forced to adapt to CCSS. All live lives shielded from the direct impact of a CCSS-forced rigidity, and all are pushing CCSS so hard as to make their doing so for ulterior motives (such as money and power) the only plausible explanation.

SS: Thank you for your time, Mercedes K. Schneider.

MKS: My pleasure, Seth. Thank you for your interest in my work.

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