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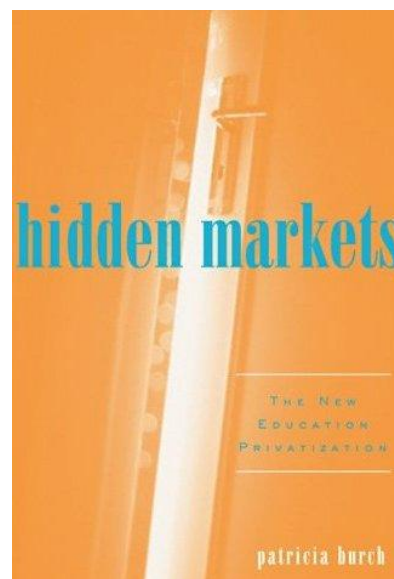
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Burch, Patricia. (2009) *Hidden Markets: The New Education Privatization*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
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In her book *Hidden Markets: The New Education Privatization*, Patricia Burch examines the effects of neoliberal business policies on public education. She discusses how No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has created an environment in public education that has increased the role of the private sector in America's schools. In the first three chapters, she lays the groundwork and explanation of the current trends and many of the parties involved, including those that transitioned from working in the Department of Education into the private sector using their knowledge of NCLB to create firms and to profit from the policies they implemented. In the following three chapters, she presents her concerns about the current movement of private for-profit firms becoming more involved in the public education sector. In the final chapter, she calls for more accountability



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and transparency. This book should not be interpreted as a polemic against NCLB or private providers, but instead it should be seen as turning the light on in the basement and exposing the dark corners.

Burch examined some overall trends since the passage of NCLB. She discovered the American public school has increasingly been intruded upon by the private sector. In Chapter 4, Burch shows how test preparation companies are becoming involved in such supplemental education services (SES) as after-school tutoring. Supplemental education services are requirements of NCLB after a school has failed to meet testing goals for several years. The district is required to pay for the vendors, but the district may not provide the services itself. She also examines how textbook companies have developed SES departments locking school districts into multiple contracts with various levels of involvement in the districts' curriculum, assessment, and improvement plans.

One of the unintended consequences of having larger or national firms competing for students, the author notes, is the use of incentives for student recruitment. Some students in this district went from vendor to vendor to receive as many of the incentives as possible. She also exposes that in an age of over-accountability in American schools, many of the private partners are not required to demonstrate the same level of accountability as the schools they serve and in some cases there is no accountability at all. Burch also discovered that many of the vendors did not provide innovative or creative strategies to improve student achievement. Some hired school teachers from the district, and many merely repeated the same activities that students performed during the regular school day, e. g. worksheets, sitting in rows, and a high student-to-tutor ratio.

Parents and guardians often are unable to wade through the volumes of information provided to them to find appropriate services for their student. Many families are left not knowing or uninformed about how their student is progressing in the program or how the services provided are improving their performance in school. Parents and

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guardians felt further removed from the process. Many of those interviewed were frustrated with not being able to ask questions or get progress reports from tutors. Many parents were even unaware of what happened during a typical tutoring session.

In a shocking case of inequity, Burch provides the evidence that many of the structures in place to create inequities also exist in the SES market. Laws require that districts insure that SES opportunities are offered to students with special needs and to English language learners. Burch found in the district she studied that only one of the vendors offered services to English language learners. Vendors and service providers should be much more equipped to handle issues of individualized instruction. However, she found that most providers were not providing services to students that required special attention.

In Chapter 5, the author describes the newer influences of virtual charter schools and how they raise issues of inequity. Burch found that many of the students enrolled in each of three virtual charter schools were white and from districts that had higher enrollments of ethnic minority students. She discovered that many of the virtual schools had interview practices that allowed them to sort out students who could potentially affect their test scores negatively. They discouraged families with disadvantaged backgrounds, lack of English language skills, and special needs from attending school through the online academies.

Burch describes that due to the lack of overhead costs, many virtual academies are potentially making money from the state. The academies do not have to hire certified teachers, which reduces the cost of payroll. They can enroll students up to 50 or 60 in a class, which also reduces the number of teachers needed. One firm protected itself from losses in case of student transfers. It was able to collect money for a student who had transferred from the virtual school back to the original district. The district would lose the allotment for students who re-enrolled based on the contract with the provider.

Another issue presented by virtual schools was that teachers and administrators were still doing a lot of work behind the scenes. Teachers in one virtual academy would meet on their own for unofficial professional development purposes; they would discuss differentiation of instruction, and even develop their own supplemental materials for students who had fallen behind or were not achieving. These presented equity issues in terms of time, but it also presented issues of professionalism as defined by the provider. Teachers were often using patented curriculum; and the development of supplemental materials could present a breach of copyright. Without the support network often found in a bricks-and-mortar school, many of the teachers did what they thought was best for the students regardless of the company policy. She also found that there were invisible influences both from SES and virtual charter schools in the development of district policy and curriculum. In both cases, members of the SES vendors were invited to be a part of school board discussions of implementation and how to better align curriculum to their services. In the respect of virtual academies, one company had a representative that worked in the district offices. She expressed her own concerns about attending meetings and whether she was required to do what was best for the students or to toe the company line in those meetings and look out for the company's bottom line.

In Chapter 6, Burch describes a recent trend in schools and one that I experienced first-hand in my last year of teaching in the Gwinnett County (GA) Public School District. She examines the development of new data analysis companies that have gotten into the market of benchmark testing. She describes three different school districts and their use of these systems. Ideally what the systems should do is provide teachers with data that allow them to see how their students perform on certain district standards. There are several companies that will contract for their services and provide districts with multiple layers of data analysis in as many different categories as the district wants or can afford. This service does come with a price, as Burch observes. Many districts spend millions of dollars working with a vendor to develop the data analysis software that some teachers may or may not have access to. In the past, districts would give

paper-and-pencil tests and then break down the scores and disaggregate the data employing district staff. With the software, many of the companies can disaggregate it for the teachers. In one district, the union intervened on the teachers' behalf and insisted that they should not have to do any data entry including scanning Scantron sheets into the computer. The company provided FedEx services for teachers to send testing sheets overnight.

As with most software contracts, vendors would often require agreements with mandatory updates to the software. These updates would lock schools and districts into long-term and costly contracts. Some companies provided test bank questions with updates, and some districts were able to write their own tests and use the software to analyze the results. Some of the teachers did not initially use the information provided or were required to attend professional development sessions on how to use the program in its first years of implementation. This typically meant the first year of the program was lost due to the steep learning curve of a new structure. One school district found that after much negotiating and planning that the service provider was unable to handle their specific needs and essentially wasted the time and money to discover the service was incompatible. In a positive note, another district was able to create a program with an independent contractor and found the process useful because they were able to design the system as opposed to a company applying a template to the district.

In my experience with the benchmark idea in the Georgia public schools, it was good in theory, but there were very few teachers who used it in practice, myself included. The system was set up so that the students were asked random questions intended to assess their progress towards mastery of particular standards. We administered a pre-test, a "mid-term," and an end-of-semester test. I found that often the standards being assessed on the pre-test were not aligned with those in the other tests. I also found that standards were assessed on the later tests that were not on the pre-test. It was very confusing for me to figure out what to do with the data. I did find it interesting that I could compare my

students to the entire grade-level and district through the software, but many of the students simply did not take the tests seriously. The data were typically inaccurate. The process took away at least three days of class time each semester, planning and after school time for me to disaggregate the data for my classes, and ultimately I barely used the data to guide my instruction.

Burch is masterful at conveying a knowledge of the layers of policy in NCLB and the many entanglements of private vendors using public funds, perpetual inequities for some underperforming students, and the influence of market principles being applied to education. In her final chapter, she describes possible solutions such as increasing transparency and accountability for private firms providing services and increased collaboration between providers, schools, and governments. The lines between public and private have blurred, and Burch's book is an effort to keep them from blending completely.

About the Reviewer

Sean B. Geary was raised in a family of teachers. At the age of 12, he vowed never to teach but eventually gave in and joined the "family business." After primarily teaching English and Language Arts in multiple school settings in two states for 10 years, he decided to pursue his PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Arizona State University. His research interests include school choice and charter schools as well as the use of schools and students as commercial marketing targets.



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