



Cardine, C. J. (2018). *Carpetbagging America's public schools: The radical reconstruction of public education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

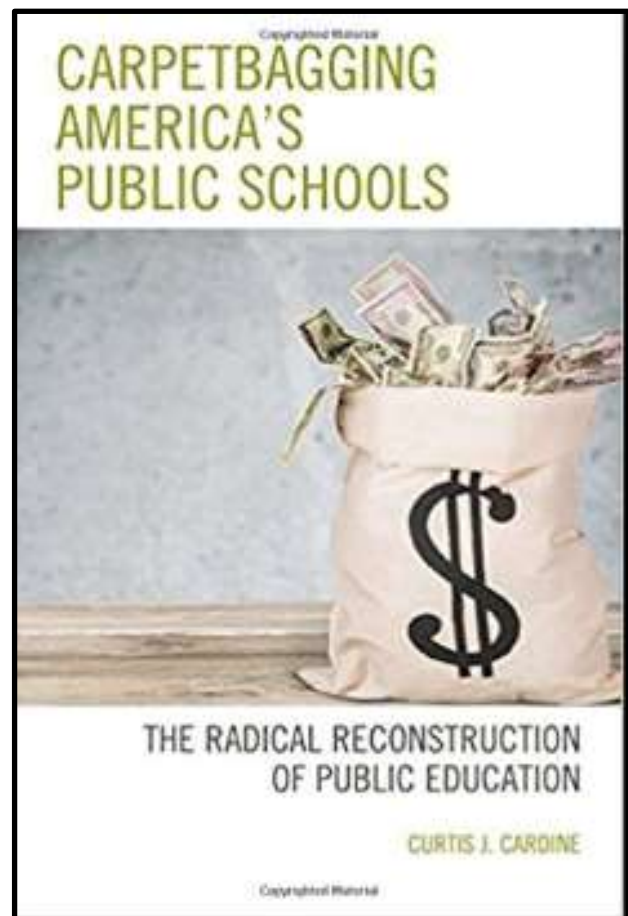
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A financial crisis is coming, Curtis J. Cardine warns. The American public can expect another cataclysmic collapse similar to the housing crisis of 2007-2008. Only this time, the crosshairs aren't trained on homeowners with popping balloon payments. This time, Cardine argues, our children are the targets.

In *Carpetbagging America's Public Schools: The Radical Reconstruction of Public Education*, Cardine spotlights the troubling school funding mechanisms and subsequent financial mismanagement ushered in by the establishment of charter schools more than 20 years ago. As Cardine explains, "Charter laws represent a radical reconstruction, through deregulation, of the funding and governance systems designed to protect the American Public Education System." (p. 3) This reconstruction involves providing charter schools more autonomy and fewer regulations of their financial management, hiring, school calendar, and curriculum, among other areas, when compared with traditional public schools. The lack of financial oversight and questionable motives of charter school leaders, Cardine writes, have led to a misuse of tax



dollars, erosion of public education, and harm to students' education. Cardine, who worked as a charter school administrator from the late 1990s into the mid-2010s, and who has conducted a meta-analysis of charter financial and governance data since 2012, tackles his ambitious claims with mixed success.

The author certainly has lofty ambitions, beginning with the loaded title of his book – *Carpetbagging America's Public Schools*. He goes even further on the first page of the book, labeling most school-choice and charter proponents as “carpetbaggers and scalawags,” drawing comparisons to the nefarious business dealings of some Northerners working in the American South after the Civil War. (p. 1) While Cardine references some compelling numerical data and shares some interesting anecdotes, much of the book is bombast.

A more accurate title would be “Carpetbagging Arizona's Public Schools.” Cardine uses three main sources of data for his financial and governance meta-analysis, all specific to Arizona schools: IRS Form 990s for non-profit schools, Arizona Department of Education Annual Financial Reviews, and Arizona State Board for Charter Schools audits. Throughout the book, Cardine spotlights a few other charter schools across the nation – mainly in New Hampshire where he also worked in the charter community. But he fails to specifically connect the troubling signs in Arizona to a national and international movement, as scholars Scott & Holme (2016) and Cochran-Smith et al. (2018) have done. A glaring omission in *Carpetbagging* given Cardine's scope is a need to explore the potential impact of the current federal administration's stance on school funding nationwide. President Trump and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos strongly support deregulations around school funding to promote a free market of school-choice options (Angulo, 2018). This growing mindset, Cardine writes, shifts public, taxpayer dollars to spaces with private oversight (charters, private schools, online schools), where the

money is mismanaged, “Putting profits for entrepreneurs ahead of our children's educational opportunities” (p. 131). Scott & Holme (2016) observed much the same, writing, “As ... the fiscal effects of the growth of charter schools have constrained urban school districts financially, opportunities have been created for elites to remake urban space and public schools” (p. 284).

This deregulation of schools is growing in the United States. Its influence can be found not only on school finance, as Cardine explores, but in the core ideology of schools, districts, and other education organizations across the country and even in parts of Europe and the Middle East. In my home of Denver, Colorado, the state branch of Teach for America recently hired Arthur Brooks – American Enterprise Institute president, author of pro-free-market books like *The Conservative Heart*, *Gross National Happiness*, and *The Road to Freedom*, and *New York Times* columnist – to deliver the welcome address to the Corps' 2018 cohort. Also in Colorado, a charter and free-market education advocate, Mike Johnston, recently garnered nearly 25% of the popular vote in the state's Democratic governor primary (Meltzer, 2018). Who won the governor's race? That would be Jared Polis, who started his own charter school network in 2004 (Robles, 2017).

The examples extend far past Colorado. The East Coast charter network Uncommon Schools has monetized and promoted their brand through the creation of the Relay Graduate School of Education, taking advantage of the broader trend of educational deregulation to establish essentially a charter school of higher education (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). Match Charter Public School has done the same with their Sposato School of Education (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). Achievement Network (better known as ANet) has developed a national brand not only with their charter schools but by selling academic materials including test banks aligned with state standardized assessments. Clearly,

“carpetbaggers and scalawags,” to borrow Cardine’s labels, are spread across the nation and even beyond to England, Ireland, and Israel (Cochran-Smith, et al., 2018). Tracing support for free-market, education-reform backed ventures through various states, as well as all the way to the White House and the U.S. Department of Education, could have bolstered the author’s thesis and backed up the title. Instead, Cardine falls short, directing his focus too locally given the national and worldwide trend of school deregulation.

Cardine’s missed opportunities make this book a tunnel-vision case study of Arizona’s charter calamities. To his credit, there are many troubles to spotlight. As Cardine repeats in several of the 34 chapters, 77% of the Arizona charters studied operated in a financially unethical and unsound manner (p. 3, 9, 22, 30, 46, 173). Some of the common mistakes Arizona charters have made include over-leveraging debt (p. 220), relying on situational ethics instead of a sound educational and financial vision (p. 221), and corporate greed (p. 226). Several of the charters studied paid teachers poorly (and often through a loophole of a shell company) while rewarding administrators handsomely: “IRS filings pointed to one parliamentarian/owner/board member [who] took compensation of \$276,000 for a school with 300 students ... Parliamentarian was how the owner described his position” (p. 214). Cardine also uncovered excessive payments to “friendly related parties” for property, educational services, and technology (p. 227). Some current news bolsters Cardine’s point. A November, 2018, newspaper report revealed that Damian Creamer, CEO of Arizona’s Primavera online charter school network, in the past year paid \$1.3 million to himself and \$27.6 million for curriculum, enrollment, and technical support to a private company he owns while giving his 95 teachers a 1% pay raise (Harris, 2018). Cardine contends that the actions of school leaders like Creamer, who are allowed to use public funds to buy

property and infrastructure that becomes privately owned and controlled, are the problems that need fixing. As it stands now in Arizona and beyond, charter entrepreneurs win while taxpayers and students lose.

The root of these problems, Cardine writes, is a well-calculated campaign by the charter community to tear down the nation’s traditional approach to public schooling. Charter proponents start by framing the American education system as broken. They then attack teachers, often accusing unions of keeping poor educators in the classroom. These free-market education supporters then lobby legislators to codify, as Cardine calls it, a rigged system. The result? Cardine writes, “We have replaced social capital and common schools for all with capitalist profits and segregation from the community for the few” (p. 51).

While the problem is dire, Cardine argues for several fiscal and governance changes that could help avoid an educational collapse, including tighter fiscal regulations and more stringent fiscal reporting and audit procedures. He suggests reducing financial loopholes in school laws and enacting more rigorous academic accountability measures. “Charters,” Cardine writes, “can be a viable part of our educational process” (p. 219). He points to the 23% of charter schools in his Arizona meta-analysis that are finding a way to provide students a quality education while running the school or network in a fiscally responsible way.

Cardine sprinkles in a few anecdotes from his 45 years of experience, most memorably a troubling conversation he overheard in which Ohio charter school leaders discussed how they avoid accepting “special-needs” students into their schools (p. 55). Instead, Cardine chooses to link his observations to centuries-old economic and legislative documents and figures. Alexander Hamilton makes several appearances. Cardine certainly would have better served his point had he turned his focus

to himself a bit more. In the “About the Author” section at the end of the book, Cardine too briefly describes his career trajectory, which includes his decision to leave the charter school business altogether because of his charter employers’ “use of situational business ethics applied to ... financial and governance practices” (p. 252). Selfishly, I would like to hear more about his story because it is similar to mine. I taught for five years at one of Denver’s largest charter networks, and, similarly, the questionable practices – both financial and otherwise – of the school and network forced me out. This, perhaps, is Cardine’s biggest missed

opportunity. While Cardine certainly follows the money throughout Arizona and does so in detail, the human aspect of the issue of school choice and its funding could have added needed depth to the book.

Instead, readers, like me, may likely be left with a deep view of the sad state of school funding and school choice in Arizona. If the Grand Canyon State is a harbinger of an educational economic collapse, American students, parents, teachers, and all taxpayers won’t have to imagine the human impact of Cardine’s conjecture. A financial crisis – fueled by a schooling calamity – will be their reality.

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