



Friday, November 30, 2007

**Iris Salters: Labor Voices**

## **Schools get conned on privatization**

### **Private firms don't deliver better services than public support employees**



The U.S. military outsourced parts of its role in the Iraqi war. Now, Blackwater contractors are under investigation in the deaths of Iraqi civilians.

Manufacturing jobs were sent to China -- and we've seen millions of toys shipped here recalled because of safety concerns.

As Americans, we should be gravely concerned whenever politicians and corporate chief executives fail to put safety first. We should be especially vigilant about outsourcing of public-sector jobs because taxpayer dollars are at stake -- and so, too, are some of our most vulnerable citizens, our children.

More and more public schools and other public agencies are hiring private contractors that promise to do the same work for less money. In education, private contractors are allowed to perform noninstructional jobs -- from driving buses to cleaning classrooms to coaching sports. Because they interact with children, we must make sure that those who work in the education setting meet the highest standards.

And yet, outsourcing of public school support personnel is accepted in many districts. Why? Because it may cost less without sacrificing quality -- or so school boards are promised.

School boards are conned into believing a private company can provide the same service for a lower price. And school board members, so focused on the bottom line, ignore reasonable concerns about student safety.

Sadly, some of our most cash-starved schools don't have the financial resources to pay for books, paper, qualified teachers, expert bus drivers and conscientious custodians, so privatization can appear to be a good idea.

The duping of school board members around the state is common. Privatization proponents tell them that private companies must perform well, or the district can fire the company.

Sounds reasonable, right? Well, we've seen plenty of situations where privatization hasn't panned out, and school boards refuse to do anything, often because the cost to terminate the contract early is prohibitive.

Consider Hartland Consolidated Schools.

The Hartland school board voted in 2006 to lay off the district's custodians and hire a private company to do their work. Despite public claims that the switch has gone well, public records obtained by the Michigan Education Association detail scores of complaints from school employees about the company's poor service.

**Costly contracts with companies**

The complaints, documented in e-mails requested under the Freedom of Information Act, show a range of concerns. From dirty classrooms and bathrooms to unlocked and unsecured school buildings, the e-mails illustrate the pitfalls of privatization in public education.

Claims that privatization would save an estimated \$500,000 in the first year without sacrificing quality haven't materialized.

It's also worth taking note of employee turnover in Hartland: After the first six months, 15 of the 36 custodians placed by the private company in the district were no longer working there (six additional employees didn't make it past the probationary period).

Despite these problems, a local newspaper quoted a top district official as saying privatization is working.

School officials are reluctant to admit when privatization doesn't work. Sometimes, it's a pride issue. Or, it may be the penalties built into contracts with privateers. In Hartland, firing the private firm in the first year would have cost \$180,000 in addition to the fees for work completed, according to the contract between the district and the company.

In our cash-strapped state, districts are doing everything they can to pinch pennies. School employees, too, have accepted lower wages and switched health plans to help districts balance their budgets.

But opting to hand public money to private companies while firing the dedicated school support personnel who care deeply about students should not be a path districts follow. At the end of the day, these employees are your neighbors -- they support local businesses and pay taxes. They care about the success of their communities' children. No bottom line is worth harming a community that deeply.

We all know the adage that you get what you pay for. Privatization is proof that it's true. When districts try to do things on the cheap, students, taxpayers and the entire community pay.

*Iris Salters is president of the Michigan Education Association, a union that represents teachers and education support staff. Please e-mail comments to [letters@detnews.com](mailto:letters@detnews.com).*

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071130/OPINION03/711300312>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© Copyright 2007 The Detroit News. All rights reserved.