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POLITICS

Why Are Walmart Billionaires Bankrolling Phony School 'Reform' In LA?

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For years, Los Angeles has been ground zero in an intense debate about how to improve our nation's education system. What's less known is who is shaping that debate. Many of the biggest contributors to the so-called "school choice" movement -- code words for privatizing our public education system -- are billionaires who don't live in Southern California, but have gained significant influence in local school politics. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's recent contribution of \$1 million to a political action committee created to influence next week's LAUSD school board elections is only the most recent example of the billionaire blitzkrieg.

For more than a decade, however, one of the biggest of the billionaire interlopers has been the Walton family, heirs to the Walmart fortune, who have poured millions into a privatization-oriented, ideological campaign to make LA a laboratory for their ideas about treating schools like for-profit businesses, and treating parents, students and teachers like cogs in what they must think are education big-box retail stores.

As a business chain, Walmart has spent a fortune -- in philanthropy and campaign contributions -- trying to break into the Los Angeles retail market with its low-wage retail stores.

Now the Walton family -- which derives its fortune from the Arkansas-based Walmart -- is trying to use that fortune to bring Walmart-style education to Los Angeles.

The Waltons have long supported efforts to privatize education through the Walton Family Foundation as well as individual political donations to local candidates. Since 2005, the Waltons have given more than \$1 billion to organizations and candidates who support privatization. They've channeled the funds to the pro-charter and pro-voucher Milton Friedman Foundation for Education Choice, Michelle Rhee's pro-privatization and high-stakes testing organization Students First, and the pro-voucher Alliance for School Choice, where Walton family member Carrie Walton Penner sits on the board. In addition to funding these corporate-style education reform organizations, since 2000 the Waltons have also spent more than \$24 million bankrolling politicians, political action committees, and ballot issues in California and elsewhere at the state and local level which undermine public education and literally shortchange students.

In 2006, Greg Penner, who married Carrie Walton Penner (daughter of Walmart chairman Rob Walton and granddaughter of Walmart founder Sam Walton) and serves on Walmart's board, spent \$250,000 to oppose a statewide ballot initiative that would have created a universal preschool system to give California's children a much-needed leg up in early education. It also would have created thousands of good jobs for preschool teachers.

In Los Angeles alone, the Walton Family Foundation has donated over \$84.3 million to charter schools and organizations that support them, such as Green Dot Schools, ICEF schools, and the Los Angeles Parent Union, as well as \$1 million to candidates or political action committees which support diverting tax dollars away from public schools. They believe in high-stakes testing, hate teachers unions, want to measure student and teacher success primarily by relying on one-size-fits-all standardized tests, but have an entirely different set of standards when it comes to judging charter schools.

You'd think that the Waltons would invest in ideas that would improve education. But there's little evidence that private charter schools and vouchers -- the Waltons' two big obsessions -- are effective at boosting students' learning outcomes. A 2009 study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University discovered that only 17 percent of charter schools provided a better education than traditional public schools. Thirty-seven percent actually offered children a worse education. In other words, on balance, charters make things worse, even though many of those schools "cream" the best students from regular public schools. Just this month, the same Stanford center released a study that called for stronger monitoring and review processes for charter schools.

Other research confirms that charters rarely deliver on the promises their backers make. In October 2012, the Office of the Inspector General at the U.S. Department of Education released an audit finding that the California Department of Education lacks the necessary oversight capabilities to monitor charter schools' compliance with federal law. With about 100,000 children in charters -- the highest number of charter students in the country, representing more than 15 percent of the children in the district -- Los Angeles bears the brunt of this regulatory failure.

The Walton family became America's richest family by creating a retail model built on ruthless cost-cutting, low wages and few benefits. So, it isn't surprising that some studies show that charter school teachers are paid less than teachers at

traditional public schools and have few years of education on average. Is this the right model for our schools?

Many studies show that parents' incomes are the best predictor of students' academic performance, which results in a wide "achievement gap" between affluent and low-income students. Walmart contributes to this gap. It is not only the nation's largest private employer, with well over one million employees, but it also has the largest number of poverty-level jobs in the country. If the Waltons, who still own half of Walmart, really wanted to do something to help improve schools, they could start by paying their employees a living wage.

If we are serious about the future of our children, we must ask: why are the Waltons, a largely out-of-state family with no ties to Los Angeles' children and little background in education, intent on turning our communities' educational choices into a junior version of the cut-throat, profiteering corporate world? It's time for us to take a hard look at ideological billionaires who are throwing their wealth into undermining our schools -- before our children pay the real price.

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