5

EDUCATION DREAMS AND VIRTUAL NIGHTMARES

In December of 2016, President-elect Donald Trump announced that he would tap the Michigan multibillionaire Betsy DeVos as his nominee for the Department of Education. She was confirmed in February 2017. DeVos was a longtime school choice activist in the free market–inspired vein of Milton Freidman, and upon hearing the news of her nomination, public school teachers, unions, and advocates mounted a vigorous campaign to oppose her confirmation. Protesters pointed to her involvement in the expansion of unregulated charter schools in Michigan, to her support of school vouchers, and to comments of hers that critics saw as hostile to public schools. Journalist Rebecca Mead, writing in the *New Yorker*, summed up the dismay over her nomination by saying, "DeVos has never taught in a public school, nor administered one, nor sent her children to one." In addition to concerns over her lack of personal involvement with traditional public schools, there were further questions about her support for free market–inspired forms of public education such as vouchers and virtual charter schools.[1]

In a 2013 interview with *Philanthropy Magazine*, DeVos said her ultimate goals in education reform encompassed not just charter schools and voucher programs, but also virtual education. She said these forms were important because they would allow "all parents, regardless of their zip code, to have the opportunity to choose the best educational setting for their children." Also in 2013, one

of the organizations that she founded, the American Federation for Children, put out a sharply critical statement after New Jersey's school chief, Chris Cerf, declined to authorize two virtual charter schools. The group said the decision "depriv[es] students of vital educational options." Yet another group DeVos founded and funded, the Michigan-based Great Lakes Education Project, has also advocated for expansion of online schools, and in a 2015 speech available on YouTube DeVos praised "virtual schools [and] online learning" as part of an "open system of choices." She then said, "We must open up the education industry—and let's not kid ourselves that it isn't an industry. We must open it up to entrepreneurs and innovators." DeVos's ties to—and support for—the profoundly troubled virtual school industry run deep.[2]

At the time of her nomination, charter schools were likely familiar to most listeners given their rapid growth and ubiquity. However, the press surrounding the DeVos nomination may have been one of the first times most became aware of a particular offshoot of the charter school movement—virtual or cyber schools. Despite flying somewhat under the mainstream radar, online charter schools have faced a wave of both negative press and poor results in research studies. One large-scale study from 2015 found that the "academic benefits from online charter schools are currently the exception rather than the rule." By June of 2016, even a group that supports, runs, and owns charter schools published a report calling for more stringent oversight and regulation of online charter schools, saying, "The well-documented, disturbingly low performance by too many full-time virtual charter public schools should serve as a call to action for state leaders and authorizers across the country." The jointly authored research was sponsored by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, and 50Can, all groups that lobby state and federal agencies to loosen regulations to allow more robust charter-school growth. As one of the report's backers said, "I'm not concerned that Betsy DeVos

supports virtual schools, because we support them too—we just want them to be a lot better." Such an upswing in quality seems highly unlikely to happen anytime soon. They are yet another trickle in the stream of apartheid forms of public education flowing down from the wealthy and politically well connected to communities that are poor, of color, or both.[3]

This chapter looks at the impact of the educational choices, such as virtual education, supported by an expanding group of governors. In Pennsylvania, Michigan, South Carolina, Ohio, and Florida, poor students from rural areas as well as those in underfunded urban schools that primarily educate students who are Black and Latino today face a new response to the question of how to solve the riddle of race, poverty, and educational underachievement. Increasingly, despite little supporting evidence, a growing number of states and local school districts no longer believe that the solution is merely about infrastructure, class size, funding, or hiring more teachers. In states with high levels of poverty and "hard to educate" Black and Latino students, virtual schools are on the rise. Such schools are not growing nearly as fast in school districts that are white and relatively wealthy, nor are they the educational strategy of choice in most private schools. As much a business strategy as one promoting learning, virtual education allows businesses to profit from racial inequality and poverty. Sadly, this particular cure to what ails our education system more often than not exacerbates the problems.

Though supported by Democrats as well, the expansion of virtual charter schools accelerated as Republicans increased their margin of control in governor's mansions and state legislatures across the country. At the start of 2016, Republicans occupied thirty-two of the nation's fifty governorships, ten more than they did in 2009. During that same period of time, Republican control of state legislatures doubled. What that means is that by 2016, Republicans controlled more legislative chambers than they did in the entire history of their party. The same political winds

that have shifted to blow so many Republicans into office have, at the same time, pushed virtual education to the forefront of educational policy for a certain segment of our nation's youth. This chapter looks at how this came to be.[4]

Hoping That Every Student Succeeds

In December of 2015, Congress sent the long-awaited overhaul of the federal government's education bill to the White House for President Obama's signature. Called the Every Student Succeeds Act, the new bill updated the previous educational act signed into law in 2002 by President George W. Bush, No Child Left Behind. When introducing that new act, Bush said that it was a means for our nation's schools to begin to seriously combat what he termed "the soft bigotry of low expectations" that had so often stood in the way of ensuring the success of America's children who were poor, of color, special needs, or in any way struggling to achieve academically. President Bush promised the nation that No Child Left Behind would require that by 2014, 100 percent of all public school children could perform at grade level as measured by standardized tests in the areas of math and reading. However, by 2012, President Obama's administration and much of the rest of the country realized we as a nation were far from successfully achieving the previous president's promised outcomes. Obama's education bill made no grand promises such as those found in the previous law, and in many ways was most notable for the fact that, unlike No Child Left Behind, with its push to give the federal government authority to prescribe and enforce educational standards, curriculum, and consequences from Washington, the Every Child Succeeds Act by and large returned such matters to the control of the states and local governments.

Proposals for addressing issues of racial equity and fairness

have not tended to benefit the poor and non-white when left to states to decide. In regard to educational equality, according to the progressive Republican watchdog organization American Bridge 21st Century, beginning in 2010 the Republican candidates for governor in Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Kansas, and Ohio rode a cresting wave of Tea Party support to elected office. They all campaigned on promises of massive budget overhauls that would cut taxes for both wealthy individuals and businesses. Once elected, in order to deliver on those promises, one governor after another eyed the funding pots set aside for public education as a way to pay for their budget priorities. By 2014, the legislative overhaul was complete, and the impact of the electoral shifts meant that changes were not just a matter of states' and local governments' agreeing about the best ways to fund the education of children who were poor and non-white. No, with this shift in the political landscape, the very nature and meaning of education underwent a change as well. Republican governors hewed closely to their party platform on education, which, in sum, aimed to shrink federal oversight of education; increase parental choice and flexibility; allow federal dollars to follow children to the school of their choice; expand school choice by increasing the number of charter schools; return greater control to parents, teachers, and school boards; and defend and increase options for home schooling. In regard to education, the shift was away from government regulation of public schools even while the proposed alternatives required taxpayer dollars.[5]

As educational historian Diane Ravitch has pointed out, the educational reforms championed by these legislators seek to

eliminate the geographically based system of public education as we have known it for the past 150 years and replace it with a competitive market-based system of school choice—one that includes traditional public schools, privately managed charter schools,

religious schools, voucher schools, for-profit schools, virtual schools and for-profit vendors of instruction. Lacking any geographic boundaries, these schools would compete for customers.[6]

Virtual schools and their growth in both number and significance were not part of the public discussion surrounding the repeal of No Child Left Behind. Still, in reality, as it became more and more clear that the new education bill would pass, interest groups, state legislatures, and educational nonprofits interested in the lucrative, easy expansion of virtual education all sprang into action. Many knew that states would now have more power to propose the expansion of such schools, allegedly as a way of confronting the challenges facing states in need of creative ways to address the educational deficiencies of their lowest-achieving students, who were usually poor and often of color.

In April 2015, the Alabama State Legislature voted up State Bill 0072, known as the Virtual School Options for Local Boards of Education Bill. It required that, "at a minimum, each local board of education" adopt a policy for providing a "virtual option for eligible students in grades 9–12." In Maine, two virtual academies opened in 2014 to specifically educate students in the state's "poorer districts" and in May of 2015 the state explored the feasibility of opening a state-run virtual academy. In June, state education officials in Illinois announced that they would begin to test out limited online learning options during snow days for a three-year period. Following their analysis at the end of the test period, they held open the possibility of more wide-ranging implementation. The Virginia Department of Education piloted a new program during the 2015–2016 school year in which students spent 100 percent of their time in a cyber school, never setting foot inside a school. This flurry of activity was brought on by the ease and speed with which these new computer-based schools could expand and by the fact that the financial rewards were simply too great for cash-strapped politicians to ignore.[7]

By 2015 virtual schools had gone mainstream, aided in part by the fact that between 2008 and 2014, 175 bills that expanded online schooling options passed in thirty-nine states and territories (including the District of Columbia). As a result, today there are public schools in every state that offer some form of online coursework, and in five states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Michigan, and Virginia—students are actually *required* to take at least one online or partly digital class if they want to graduate from high school. In thirty states and Washington, D.C., there are fully online schools available.[8]

Despite all of the state- and federal-level support for these new education methods, all of this growth has happened without a similar amount of verification of the efficacy of virtual education. Over the past decade, we have heard more about the failure of Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, to make a memorable impact on the style in which college instruction is delivered than we have about the success or failure of virtual education at the K–12 level. Colleges might get all the attention for going online in part because big brand names like MIT and Harvard now offer virtual courses for free around the world, but K–12 online schooling has, over the past twenty years, become a major player in the educational arena. As a result of MOOCs and other developments overshadowing this conversation, little attention has been paid to where in the country this profitable switch has grown most rapidly: areas with high levels of racial and economic inequality fueled by segregation. In districts that are rural and poor, and overwhelmingly with Republican governors and legislatures, in states like Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina, or in urban districts like Philadelphia, virtual schools are quickly becoming the format of choice despite politicians' having little grasp on how cyber education impacts achievement for the most vulnerable students.[9]

According to a 2012 *Philadelphia Citypaper* article, "Who's Killing Philly Schools," in a district comprised of 80 percent

Black and Latino students, the vast majority of whom are below the poverty line, cyber schools accounted for fully educating more than a third of the children in 2014. The goal is for that number to rise to at least three-quarters, if not more, in subsequent years.[10] However, between 2011 and 2014, 100 percent of the children enrolled in Philadelphia-area cyber schools who took state achievement tests failed. The record of Pennsylvania's fourteen cyber charter schools was so abysmal that the state of Pennsylvania denied all applications to open new cyber charter schools in 2013 and 2014. Their poor track record has not derailed the long-term plan of increasing the numbers of students who take classes via virtual education, however.[11]

Cyber education grew during the term of Pennsylvania's Republican governor Tom Corbett. Elected in 2010 and serving only a four-year term, his policies exemplified the organized effort on the part of political and business leaders to spearhead the shift to online learning. His first step was taking funding away from "brick and mortar" schools. In his first full year in office, he cut funding to the Philadelphia School District by $198 million, a 20 percent cut. Then, in 2011, he reduced public school funding by another $900 million, or 10 percent. Those cuts, plus more the next year, meant that by 2013 thousands of teachers were laid off and almost 70 percent of Pennsylvania's school districts increased their class size, 40 percent cut extracurricular activities, and 75 percent cut instruction. The impact of his educational leadership was devastating for schools and communities throughout the state, and districts targeted by Corbett's cuts felt them intensely. Dozens of schools closed. Thousands of teachers and school support staff were laid off. Art and music became scarce, along with nurses and guidance counselors. School buildings became so unpleasant that virtual education almost seemed like a respite.[12]

In one particularly telling real-world example from 2016 of how such cuts affected students in the "brick and mortar" district, high school junior Jameria Miller talks about why she starts every

morning running through the school to get a good seat near the front of the room in her first-period Spanish class. It's not because she is just excited about the class. It's because the school is cold. As she explains, "The cold is definitely a distraction. We race to class to get the best blankets." What she means is that because the classroom where she begins her day has uninsulated metal walls, Jameria's teacher hands out blankets to the students on a first come, first served basis. It's the only way for them to stay warm. Miller's school in the William Penn District is situated in Philadelphia's "inner-ring" suburbs and serves a student body that is majority Black and overwhelmingly impoverished. Though concentrating in the cold is hard enough, Miller says the hardest part of her daily ordeal is the knowledge that life isn't like this for students in other districts. She means students in wealthier districts. "It's never going to be fair, they're always going to be a step ahead of us. They'll have more money than us, and they'll get better jobs than us, always." She says she doesn't believe that either funding or systemic school improvement will ever truly equalize: "What I'm about to say might not be very nice, but rich people aren't going to want [funding fairness]. They want their kids to have better things so that their kids can get a jump start in life and be ahead of everyone else. And, as long as people feel that way, we all won't be equal. We won't receive equal education ever, because education is what gets you success." Her district is not the only one in Pennsylvania so affected.[13]

Since 1998, Philadelphia schools—the largest city and school district in the state—have been run by the governor-appointed School Reform Commission. In the summer of 2013, in order to address a $350 million hole in its budget, the commission passed what was termed a "doomsday budget." Thirty schools were closed that year. In 2014, Thomas Knudsen, chief recovery officer for the School Reform Commission, told a reporter writing a story for *Salon* that the commission wanted to "close 40 schools and an additional six every year thereafter until 2017." At that point,

he believed the district, which at its height had over 180 schools, would be down to 20 to 30, and those would be placed into "achievement networks" where public and private groups would compete to manage them. This news led the *Salon* reporter to describe what once was our nation's tenth-largest school district as being in its "death throes." The district wasn't to be saved, or even managed, by the Reform Commission as much as dismantled.[14]

Despite such severe money worries and their negative impact on "brick and mortar" schools, virtual educational sectors thrived during the same years. According to a 2011 *New York Times* article, five Pennsylvania cyber charters received $200 million in tax money in 2010–2011, and Agora Cyber Charter, which is run by the for-profit company K12, took in $31.6 million in 2013 alone from state taxpayers in Philadelphia. By 2015, cyber schools received over $60 million in per-student payments from the chronically starved and often bankrupt school districts. To make matters worse, the companies who run online and virtual schools are also consistently accused of financial impropriety. In 2011, the *New York Times* conducted a months-long investigation into virtual schools. By way of summing up its overall findings, the article begins by showing how, in the realm of education, what is good for business is not necessarily good for the students those businesses claim to educate:

> By almost every educational measure, the Agora Cyber Charter School is failing. Nearly 60 percent of its students are behind grade level in math. Nearly 50 percent trail in reading. A third do not graduate on time. And hundreds of children, from kindergartners to seniors, withdraw within months after they enroll. By Wall Street standards, though, Agora is a remarkable success that has helped enrich K12 Inc., the publicly traded company that manages the school. And the entire enterprise is paid for by taxpayers.[15]

The amount of money involved, as well as the potential profit, is significant.

One of the largest companies providing virtual education, Agora Schools, was on track to earn $72 million in 2011, a number it has bested each succeeding year from 2011 to 2014, when out of Agora's $849 million in profit, $117 million came from its virtual schools division. And those profits are for just one company, in just one area of a crowded field of online education providers. In order to help build a market for their services, these companies often target children via huge advertising buys on Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, as well as on teen sites such as MeetMe.com and VampireFreaks.com.[16]

In addition to its seeming inability to properly educate students and the unsavory targeting of children with its product, it is worth noting that Agora's parent company, K12 Inc., was founded by a man who had served federal time for financial improprieties. His name is Michael Milken. Milken not only came to symbolize 1980s-era Wall Street greed and excess by serving as the inspiration for the Michael Douglas character Gordon Gekko in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*; he also spent almost two years in a federal penitentiary for securities fraud. Once released from prison, he joined forces with another junk bond dealer, Ron Packard, who specialized in mergers and acquisitions for Goldman Sachs in the 1980s. Together they invested $10 million into K12 Inc. and formed a company with the goal of profiting from the $600 billion public education "market." They have been dogged by financial improprieties. In 2012, K12 settled a federal lawsuit for $6.8 million. The suit alleged its executives inflated stock prices by misleading investors with false student-performance claims. In the summer of 2016, the company agreed to pay $168.5 million to settle alleged violations of California's false claims, false advertising, and unfair competition laws, though the company admitted no wrongdoing. No matter; by 2016 Milken had a net

worth of around $2.5 billion, according to *Forbes*—almost all of that money from contracts with public schools.[17]

Pennsylvania has the second-highest cyber charter enrollment (after Ohio), and it accounts for about 17 percent of the national cyber charter school population, which across the country numbers over 220,000 students.[18] In terms of instruction, students usually take lessons at home, so the virtual school operators have no classrooms to maintain, staff to hire, or heating bills to pay. Teachers are paid less, and student-teacher ratios are massive, sometimes as high as fifty students for each teacher. But, despite the widespread belief in their affordability, in Pennsylvania the district pays cyber schools as much per child as it pays to educate students in brick-and-mortar schools. In 2016, most of Pennsylvania's cyber schools had dismal results. According to the state's School Performance Profile website, only three—21st Century, PA Cyber, and PA Virtual—had a score above 60. The state considers 60 and below to be substandard. None of the cyber schools scored higher than 70, which is the state's minimum passing score for all schools, and some cyber schools in the study scored down in the 30s. Such schools are neither inexpensive nor effective, yet they continue to expand.[19]

In addition to questions about how effective cyber schools are in terms of a return on investment for taxpayer dollars, an issue of particular concern is the sector's emphasis on serving so-called high-risk students who don't have the parental and other support structures that research shows are necessary to make the most of the model. Poor, rural, and urban districts are prime candidates, since cyber educators have explicitly stated that it is their business strategy to go after kids who—because it is believed that they do not have motivated parents—would demand the least from their educational experience. Students in foster care and Native Americans schooled on their tribal homelands are two categories of students targeted by virtual school providers in Florida.

Targeting the most economically vulnerable students ultimately yields cyber education businesses increased profits resulting from the segrenomics of apartheid schools. The undereducation of the poor and people of color is a business opportunity that generates great profit for businesses but provides little in the way of quality instruction.[20]

Toward that end, it is important to take a few steps back and at least notice that, despite the near-universal enthusiasm for projects that give technology to educationally vulnerable poor children of color, computer-aided instruction, when not deployed in an informed, responsible manner, actually *widens* the gap between the financially and educationally privileged and everyone else. Nonetheless, over the past ten years, public school districts have invested millions of dollars in various types of online and computer-aided learning and instruction programs, and few are able to show the educational benefit of their expenditures for a majority of students. Those who benefit most are already well organized and highly motivated. Other students struggle and, according to researchers studying students in a variety of digital settings, might even lose academic ground.[21]

Supporters of online learning say that all anyone needs in order to access a great education is a stable Internet connection, but only 35 percent of households earning less than $25,000 have broadband Internet access, compared with 94 percent of households with income in excess of $100,000. In addition, according to the 2010 Pew Report on Mobile Access, only half of Black homes have Internet connections at all, compared with almost 65 percent of white households. In its 2016 report on Internet usage, Pew related that a whopping 94 percent of Latinos used mobile phones to access the Internet, generally a much more expensive and less-than-ideal (if not altogether ineffectual) method for taking part in online education. In short, the explosion of this type of educational instruction, though on the rise, may leave wanting the very

students who need public education while at the same time offering businesses providing Internet access an opportunity to reap significant rewards.[22]

As but one example of how touting the benefits of cyber education goes hand in hand with profits for businesses, we need look no further than South Carolina. There, the growth of cyber education in the state got an advantageous boost in 2014 when the governor at the time, Nikki Haley, announced a new education budget and asked the state legislature for tens of millions of dollars to provide WiFi service to rural schoolchildren. It was a precursor to the expansion of virtual education. Once approved, the 2015 education budget provided "$29 million for improving bandwidth to school facilities, bolstering wireless connectivity within school walls, and furthering the push to ensure that every student has a computer or tablet." These changes were enacted because, according to the press release announcing the allocations, "modernizing technology and improving bandwidth will give students greater access to educational content and will help improve critical computer skills their future employers will demand." An additional $4 million was also provided for teacher technology training. Schools facing difficulties hiring could also offer courses in a "blended" setting, with students being taught online while sitting at a desk in their traditional school. Schools pay $3,500 for an entire classroom to take a virtual course—far less than the cost of a teacher. The allocation of those funds also set the stage for the aggressive expansion of online learning to a cohort of students who would benefit most from high-quality, in-person instruction.[23]

The same year that Governor Haley released her technology-enhancing budget, the National Education Policy Center issued a 2015 report finding that, "despite the considerable enthusiasm for virtual education, there is little credible research to support virtual schools' practices or to justify ongoing calls for ever greater expansion." Though the authors concede that the available data are limited, which may make their findings less than

definitive, "there is not a single positive sign from the empirical evidence presented here." Nonetheless, Governor Haley and others like her insisted that this particular form of free-market public education would help the state's children who were poor and without high-quality schools. She told the state's citizens that an increase in cyber education was, in the language of school choice advocates, tantamount to "taking a stand against the idea that where you are born and raised should influence the quality of your education."[24]

On the day that Governor Haley made her announcement, Patricia Levesque, CEO of the Foundation for Excellence in Education, an organization that former Florida governor Jeb Bush founded, released a statement through Haley's office praising the new South Carolina budget. It enthused, "The K-12 Education Reform Initiative's emphasis on literacy and technology has potential for long-term positive results for schools and children." She added, "We applaud the governor's action to build a foundation of infrastructure and resources for growth in these crucial areas for education."[25] The announcement made clear that, though she didn't mention it herself, Haley was working in concert with a group of Republican governors first organized by Florida's Jeb Bush.

Jeb Bush and the Rise of Virtual Education

In 1994, when Jeb Bush made his first, ultimately unsuccessful bid to become the governor of Florida, he was asked at a campaign stop what he would do for African Americans during his first term as governor. His answer was "Probably nothing." Journalists often point to Bush's response as the probable reason he lost that election. Others suggest that the fallout from that one interaction led him to embrace the reform of public education as a tool for closing the educational achievement gap that so negatively impacted

Black and Latino students. He thought that his efforts would play well with voters of color. Whatever the reason, soon after this defeat, Bush founded a chain of now defunct charter schools that helped to shore up his civil rights agenda (as so many so-called educational reformers do, he described the efforts to shape a racially equal educational future as the civil rights movement of our time). The next time he ran for governor, in 2002, he won with overwhelming support from Black voters in the state. He had come to be known for his education agenda, which advocated for an aggressive expansion of charter schools, including those offering a virtual education.[26]

After leaving office, Bush's desire to continue his work in education led him to create the Foundation for Florida's Future. He hoped to nationally expand the kinds of reforms that he had backed in Florida. One of the first activities the foundation undertook was reaching out to other similarly inclined Republican state education leaders to form a new group he called Chiefs for Change. Then, in 2010, along with former West Virginia governor Bob Wise, Bush launched an initiative called Digital Learning Now, which promoted the benefits of "virtual schools" providing online instruction. In a 2015 article, "The Big Jeb Bush Charter School Lie: How Florida Became a Cautionary Tale for the Rest of the Country," Jeff Bryant reports that between 2000 and 2010 the number of charter schools in Florida more than doubled, with the largest concentrations taking root in the most urbanized corridors of the state. Bryant charts the ways that, during that same period of time, the nature of the influence of Bush and his foundation also changed. It grew. Starting in 2009, Bush used the resources and network of his Foundation for Florida's Future to create a sister organization, the Foundation for Excellence in Education. This second organization was founded "in response to requests for assistance from lawmakers and policymakers who were interested in advancing reforms," according to the organization's website. In other words, the new organization existed to "lead a

more robust and focused effort to advance specific education legislation through direct lobbying and electoral activity," another way of saying its purpose was to lobby legislators and campaign to convince voters to support educational reforms that would benefit private industry.

As might be expected, according to a *New Yorker* article by Alec MacGillis, companies soon came to see Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education as an ideal platform through which to promote a range of products to state education officials. By 2010, when Bush convened a "Digital Learning Council," in addition to elected officials, he included virtual school executives from around the country. One of their first orders of business was to issue a report urging states to adopt industry-friendly measures, such as eliminating limits on virtual-school enrollment. MacGillis writes that in Maine, according to a 2012 investigation by the Portland *Press-Herald*, foundation staff members essentially wrote legislation backed by the Republican governor, Paul LePage, to expand virtual schools. When Maine's education commissioner wrote to the head of Bush's foundation, Patricia Levesque, to let her know "I have no 'political' staff who I can work with to move this stuff through the process," Levesque replied, "Let us help." According to emails obtained by the watchdog organization In the Public Interest, Levesque pitched the state commissioners on behalf of the companies that Bush's organization represented. Maine was not the only state to benefit from the group's lobbying work. In July 2011, Levesque "encouraged Chris Cerf, who was then the New Jersey commissioner [of education], to accept an offer from Dell of a demo 'teacher dashboard,' a digital classroom-management system." When interviewed on the subject, Cerf said, "Public education is a public enterprise, but it's also true that, like all public entities, it also relies on collaborations." Whatever the meaning of his cryptic response, Cerf went into business with the company.[27]

One of the first victories scored by the Digital Learning Council

was in 2011 when Utah's legislature passed a bill based almost entirely on its blueprint. It expanded opportunities for high school students to take online courses. As Stephanie Mencimer reported for *Mother Jones* in 2011 when covering how this change came about, Jeb Bush visited the state a few months before the vote in order to make the case for virtual schools to state legislators and to address Governor Gary Herbert's Education Excellence Commission. Further, as Mencimer talked with various educational stakeholders she learned that "when supporters feared that Herbert might veto it, Bush was on standby to make a governor-to-governor call" to shore up Herbert's resolve. Once Utah's bill passed, other such victories followed. Florida, Ohio, and Wisconsin quickly passed laws allowing online-education companies to access more public funds. Some even required public school students to take online classes in order to graduate. Following Ohio's Republican governor John Kasich's signed legislation authorizing online schools, Bush issued a public statement praising the vote and the politicians who'd ensured that "more students in the Buckeye State will have the opportunity to achieve their God-given potential." Today, Ohio remains one of the largest providers of online education for its students.[28]

The language around the expansion of virtual or cyber schools is couched as an opportunity for students to move away from a "one size fits all" model and as being especially useful for students who are poor and of color and who are often failed by traditional brick-and-mortar schools. While the truth of that line of argument is contested by their consistently poor performance, we know that replacing traditional public schools with the cyber school variety is lucrative. By 2012, Bush's Digital Learning Now initiative had earned revenues of $10 million, much of it in the form of tax-deductible donations from education companies. Those companies sent representatives to the summits, where foundation officials set aside time for them to have "donor meetings" with the Chiefs for Change. In 2012, the National Education

Policy Center studied virtual schools and found that their students lagged in math and reading proficiency and had lower graduation rates than those in traditional schools. Nonetheless, they continue to grow, and elected officials and educational entrepreneurs continue to tout such forms of learning as the silver bullet capable of saving public education for the poor in America. In December 2014, Bush's Digital Learning Council issued its third report card detailing the "10 Elements of High Quality Digital Learning." On the list was a call for state policymakers to "hold schools and providers accountable for achievement and growth." Which is to say, accountability falls on the businesses and companies most interested in growing and marketing their educational businesses; instead of parents, teachers, or communities determining the educational growth of students, companies that provide digital learning are themselves responsible for ensuring that the enterprise continues to prosper.[29]

It is worth noting that, for years, Bush worked closely with Betsy DeVos to expand school choice policies across the country. She served on the board of his Foundation for Excellence in Education. Now, the programs the two crafted together are likely to serve as models for federal policymaking. Governor Bush, when asked about DeVos's nomination, said, "I cannot think of a more effective and passionate change agent to press for a new education vision, one in which students, rather than adults and bureaucracies, become the priority in our nation's classrooms." The students most impacted by these policies are rarely asked what they think about such interventions. They are rarely asked what they think at all.[30]

Black and Latino children and their parents and communities have reason for concern about the rapid and unchecked growth in cyber education. It tends to impact them most. When Florida's severe budget cuts in 2011 made it difficult for schools to meet class-size rules and left them too cash-strapped to hire more teachers, some schools in the Miami-Dade district required seven thousand

of their students to take online classes in virtual labs with only noncertified teacher's aides available to provide assistance. Students did not know of these new arrangements until they showed up for school one day, and parents were neither asked about nor informed of this change. Of the district's roughly 344,000 students, 324,000 are Black or Latino. These types of educational arrangements simply do not take place in districts that are wealthy and have low numbers of students of color.[31]

It is then surprising that, to a large extent, the success of the shift to digital learning has been aided by rhetoric that positions education as a basic right of citizenship, a civil rights mountain still in need of scaling. Nonetheless, to refer back to Stephanie Mencimer's *Mother Jones* piece, "beneath the rhetoric, the online-education push is also part of a larger agenda that closely aligns with the GOP's national strategy: It siphons money from public institutions into for-profit companies." She continues to say that the tangible result of such efforts is to undercut "public employees, their unions, and the Democratic base. In the guise of a technocratic policy initiative, it delivers a political trifecta—and a big windfall for Bush's corporate backers." What it rarely delivers is a quality education, never mind one that comes close to the sort found in the wealthy, white school districts to which the Bush and DeVos families would send their own children.[32]

In many virtual school settings, students rarely even hear or see their teachers. At some cyber charter schools, students need only sign in to the school website and/or communicate with a teacher once every three days to prove they're actually attending. In Wisconsin, a state legislative audit found that 16 percent of the virtual teachers surveyed had contact with individual students as little as three times a month. Other schools in the state outsource duties such as paper grading to contractors in India, making it difficult for the teachers to meaningfully explain to students the basis for the grades they received.[33] While virtual education is a growth industry in Wisconsin, it is important to note that the state has

the largest achievement gap between Black and white students in the country and ranks last in reading-comprehension tests among Black fourth graders. Milwaukee, one of the largest cities in the state and home to the highest number of Black students, is the biggest contributor to Wisconsin's racial achievement gap. Four out of five Black children in Milwaukee live in poverty.[34]

While much of the sector's growth can be seen as being tied to states with Republican governors and legislatures, it was greatly aided in 2013 by the Obama administration when it launched the ConnectED Initiative, a five-year plan to connect nearly all U.S. students to high-speed wireless systems in their schools and libraries, earmark funds to train teachers to incorporate digital technology and devices into their lesson plans, and "unleash private sector innovation" in order make it easier for educational technology providers to offer personalized educational software, online education opportunities, and online textbooks to entire school districts. If such policies and practices actually worked to educate students who are undereducated, that might not be cause for concern. However, given all of the information that we have, we must conclude that they do not. It is then hard to understand why there is such a push to expand them. At the very least, it would make sense to also expand policies that would make it possible for schoolchildren who attend schools that lack heating in the winter to sit comfortably in their classrooms without resorting to huddling under a blanket.[35]

For too long, the price paid by some of our nation's children for the financial gain of a handful of adults has simply been too high. As we embark on the presidency of Donald Trump and wait to see what his department of education will do over the course of his presidency, we already know that a majority of state legislatures and municipal governments headed by Republicans have trod an educational path leading away from a clearly successful focus on equalized funding and racial and economic integration to one that is accepting of the status quo: racial segregation and

economic isolation. Where once we as a nation pledged to wage war on high levels of segregation in our schools, today we not only accept this injustice as an unavoidable fact but allow our government to empower corporations to benefit from the very segregation we once swore to eradicate.