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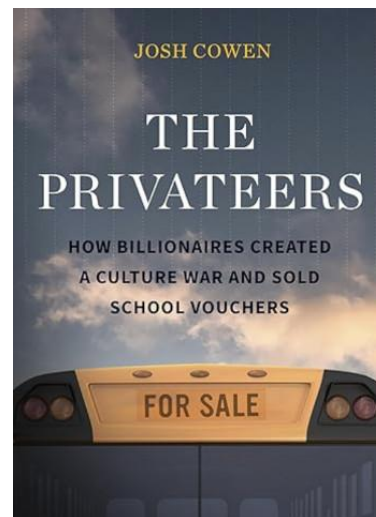
Cowen, J. (2024). *The privateers: How billionaires created a culture war and sold school vouchers*. Harvard Education Press.

224 pp.

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In *The Privateers*, Josh Cowen, professor of education policy at Michigan State University, delivers a rigorously researched critique of the U.S. school voucher movement. Drawing from his extensive experience evaluating voucher programs, Cowen reveals how a well-financed coalition of wealthy conservatives, libertarian ideologues, and religious nationalists has manufactured a false narrative about the promise of school vouchers—despite overwhelming empirical evidence of their ineffectiveness.



Cowen traces the voucher concept to economist Milton Friedman, who in the mid-20th century argued that public funds should follow students to the schools of their choice, including private and religious institutions. Friedman believed strongly in free market doctrine, arguing that competition among schools for students would increase efficiency and educational quality. Friedman believed that instead of operating public schools, the government should provide parents with vouchers—essentially coupons or grants—that they could use to pay for tuition at any school of their choice, public or private.

Cowen situates Friedman's proposition in the historical context of *Brown v. Board of Education*, showing how segregationists quickly seized on vouchers as a tool to avoid integration. This early use of vouchers, Cowen argues, laid the groundwork for today's "education freedom" rhetoric that continues to justify privatization efforts under the guise of parental choice.

The Ideological Infrastructure behind Vouchers

One of the book's most compelling contributions is its detailed mapping of the ideological and financial machinery sustaining the voucher movement. Cowen documents how wealthy conservative donors, such as the DeVos, Koch, and Bradley families, have strategically invested in advocacy organizations, think tanks, and

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political campaigns to advance educational privatization. He highlights organizations like the Bradley Foundation, Heritage Foundation, and American Enterprise Institute as key players in perpetuating this agenda.



Cowen also reveals the role of the Council for National Policy (CNP)—a clandestine network coordinating conservative activists, religious groups, and libertarian think tanks—in mainstreaming voucher policies. Through legislative, judicial, and political avenues, these groups have successfully expanded voucher programs, often framing them as solutions for underserved communities, despite clear evidence to the contrary.

“Soldier-Scholars” and Advocacy Research

Cowen devotes particular attention to what he calls the “soldier-scholars”—an incestuous group of advocacy researchers who lend intellectual legitimacy to voucher policies. He critiques this “counter-intelligentsia” for constructing a rosy scholarly narrative that conflicts with the broader empirical evidence. Members of this group often present findings in think tank reports, which are typically not subject to independent peer review, as is expected of rigorous academic research published in scholarly journals—raising important concerns about the credibility, transparency, and scholarly integrity of their claims. In juxtaposition, Cowen integrates peer-reviewed research throughout the book, demonstrating how voucher programs often produce worse academic outcomes, particularly for marginalized students.

The Effectiveness of Vouchers

Cowen presents a clear and accessible synthesis of decades of voucher research. While early studies of small programs suggested modest benefits, large-scale evaluations in locales like Washington, DC, Milwaukee, Louisiana, Indiana, and Ohio consistently reveal significant academic declines among voucher participants—declines comparable to or worse than those experienced during major disruptions like Hurricane Katrina and the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly concerning is that students transferring to private schools with the use of vouchers are often placed in lower academic tracks, exacerbating inequities rather than ameliorating them.

Cowen also highlights a common misuse of vouchers. In nine states, 70% of voucher recipients had never attended public schools, indicating that these programs often function as subsidies for families already in private education, rather than as tools for expanding opportunity.

The Threat to Public Education

Cowen argues that the voucher movement represents a deliberate assault on public education as a democratic institution. Diverting public funds to private entities, he contends, weakens public schools, worsens inequality, and erodes the civic role of education. He writes, “One thing is certain: the case for vouchers, whether by scholars, writers, lawyers, lobbyists, or billionaire heirs has always been a

deliberate construction. It is the architecture of an assault on public education as a defining American institution” (p. 14). Cowen further situates the “education freedom” agenda within the broader and recent culture wars over race, gender, and sexuality, framing vouchers as part of a larger project to devalue public schooling and reorient education toward private interests.

In the book’s epilogue, Cowen sounds a call to action, urging policymakers and advocates to develop a counter-movement that rivals the scale and coordination of the conservative infrastructure behind privatization. He stresses the need to fully fund public education and build coalitions committed to defending education as a public good. Cowen warns that secondary disagreements among public education advocates must be set aside in favor of a unified, democratic purpose.

The Privateers offers a powerful and accessible account of how school vouchers have been marketed as solutions for educational equity while advancing political objectives that undermine public education. Cowen convincingly argues that the voucher movement is less about improving learning and more about advancing privatization, weakening labor, promoting religious schooling with public dollars, and fueling ideological battles over race and identity. His work is a critical resource for scholars, policymakers, and educators seeking to understand and resist the privatization of American education.


About the Reviewer

Casey D. Cobb is the Raymond Neag Professor of Educational Policy at the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. Dr. Cobb is a National Education Policy Center Fellow and a member of the Research Advisory Panel for the National Coalition on School Diversity. His current research interests include policies on school choice, accountability, and school reform, where he examines the implications for equity and educational opportunity. Dr. Cobb was named among the top 200 RHSU Edu-Scholar Public Influencers in 2023. Dr. Cobb is former Editor of *Educational Administration Quarterly* and a former two-term member of UCEA Executive Council. He is a co-author of *Public and Private Education in America* (ABC-CLIO, Praeger), *Fundamentals of Statistical Reasoning in Education* (Wiley/Jossey Bass, 4th ed.), and *Leading Dynamic Schools* (Corwin Press). Dr. Cobb is a former member of Connecticut’s Region 19 School Board. He holds an AB from Harvard University, an MS from the University of Maine, and a PhD from Arizona State University.




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