



**Book Review: Saltman, K. J. (2005). *The Edison schools: Corporate schooling and the assault on public education*. New York and London: Routledge.**

*New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 2, Issue 2, 159-162, 2005*

---

JOHN O'NEILL  
*Massey University*

Kenneth Saltman presents a colourful case study of Edison Schools, a private corporation in the United States that has been contracted to run up to 136 public schools in 23 states as a for-profit business venture. Across the country as a whole, 417 schools in 24 states were run by 47 such Education Management Organisations (EMO) in 2003.

This book opens with an apparently archetypal description of (mostly Mexican American) children at one of the Edison schools pledging allegiance at 7.45am. The pledge, however, is not to the national flag as one would expect, but to the Edison corporation and the strict behavioural compliance it demands of its students.

*As a student at  
Edison Charter Academy  
I pledge to respect myself  
Respect my teachers  
Respect my fellow students  
And respect my building  
I will do nothing to keep the teacher from  
Teaching and anyone, myself included, from learning.*

(p. 2)

The first part of this book charts: the roller-coaster fortunes of the company and its charismatic CEO; the way in which the ideologically motivated school privatisation agenda is actively funded and vocally supported by market-liberal Republican politicians and wealthy corporate entrepreneurs in America; how, in a touch of bitter irony, public teachers' pension investment funds were at one stage sought to bail out Edison when it hit hard times during its brief period as a publicly listed and traded company; and, how popular media discourses are constantly and cynically manipulated in order to present the false impression that Edison schools do considerably better on narrow, summative student achievement tests than do their state and district run public school counterparts.

Deploying the combination of polemic, scholarship and political criticism that is claimed to be the hallmark of books in this series (and which is aimed at a general, not an academic, audience), Saltman launches a blistering attack on the privatisation agenda in America and the contiguous, systematic running down of public education and public cultural space in poor, usually urban and predominantly Black and Latino/a, school districts in the USA. In doing so, he neatly explodes the myth that Edison's practice 'in the swamp' matches the

easy rhetoric of its paper strategic corporate objectives: to offer quality educational services; operate schools for less money; and provide more services than traditional public schools (p. 13).

Part of Saltman's stated reason for writing the book is to inform the resistance of local 'activists', that is, prospective parents and students of such schools, 'so that if Chris Whittle [the Edison CEO] or another public school privatizer shows up in your community, or in one near by, you have enough information and history to engage in public debate about the implications for the community' (p. 13).

All of this may seem very distant from the contemporary New Zealand context; after all, haven't Labour Ministers of Education since 1999 regularly invoked the iconic ghosts of Clarence Beeby and Peter Fraser in their attempts to persuade us that we continue to have a well-funded, free, universal public schooling service, despite all evidence to the contrary? As soon as we delve a little deeper than emotive references to the post-Great Depression educational agenda of the first Labour government in the 1930s, however, we begin to realise that the building blocks of school privatization are all now in place in New Zealand. And, with a change of government, it is quite possible that compulsory parental voucher schemes, national testing and capped bulk funding for teachers' salaries would be in place 'by lunchtime'.

There are, in fact, strong parallels between what Saltman describes of the school privatisation agenda in America, and contemporary primary and secondary schooling policy and practice in this country. Indeed, we need look no further than our deeply entrenched and government-endorsed early childhood and tertiary education marketplaces to realise that the funding threats to primary and secondary schools in New Zealand are real and growing apace. The current government may claim that it has no intention to open up schooling, and, more to the point, the state funding of public schooling, to private business interests through the current round of general agreement on trade in services (GATS) negotiations. Yet, this has already happened under the Blair government in Cool Britannia, which remains the source of many damaging, so-called Third Way, education policies under Prime Minister Clark's Labour government in New Zealand. And, in this country, it is not too fanciful any longer to suggest that, as in Britain, the principle of state provided public schooling in this country may soon be sacrificed on the altar of global free trade agreements.

In terms of the present policy terrain, as Saltman shows, something simple is needed to lubricate the required market mechanisms in public schooling that may fuel privatisation initiatives. Simplistic measures of academic achievement are therefore imposed at system level to facilitate seemingly easy comparisons of school-school and within-school 'performance'. With this in place, the school funding tap may be turned on or off at the whim of politicians. Teaching to the high-stakes test thus becomes the norm and commercially produced curriculum materials to prepare children for these inevitably displace teacher creativity. There is already widespread anecdotal evidence from teachers in New Zealand that formulaic assessment dominates learning in both primary and secondary classrooms and that, in order to keep up with their burgeoning record keeping and reporting obligations, teachers simply have less and less time to develop contextualised learning materials to meet the needs of their students.

In chapter two, Saltman compares the curriculum content, pedagogy and assessment forms used in the commercially produced, 'canned' or 'highly scripted' curriculum (p. 84) materials in widespread use in Edison schools (the *Success for All* reading programme and *Everyday Mathematics*) with examples

of a teacher-produced set of customised project materials that aim to help young people 'read the word in order to read (understand) the world in order to change the world' (p. 104). Saltman argues very persuasively that Freire's democratic ideal of education for freedom is under serious threat from generic curriculum-assessment regimes. These, he says, have much more to do with preparing children, particularly the most disadvantaged in our society, to accept a future life of casualised employment. In effect, the argument goes, political and economic interests jointly seek to use education to protect the fast capitalist economic order. In official policy discourses of both Left and Right, now, this hegemonic economic order is misrepresented as the opportunity for all to gain high exchange-value school credentials and participate in a socially inclusive 'knowledge economy'.

Now, while we may disagree over the extent to which public schooling in New Zealand is committed by governments of both Left and Right to inevitable, creeping privatisation, what should grab and hold our collective attention is the eloquent rebuttal of privatisation that Saltman advances. Most importantly, as he argues throughout the book, this struggle for the control of public schooling is about considerably more than putting in place the most effective curriculum, pedagogical or assessment strategy, and getting the biggest bang for the taxpayer buck, as the critics of public schools would have us believe. In the final chapter of the book, Saltman systematically dismantles the ideological arguments used to underpin such market-liberal approaches to schooling. He argues not only against their highly inequitable material effects, but also against what they seek to excise from public debate around education policy and the public interest. Saltman advocates for a shared, community-based conception of education as a means of social transformation, as opposed to contemporary politicians' conception of education as, at most, the means of ensuring limited economic mobility and superficial social inclusion.

Saltman acknowledges that an understanding of the full extent of the connections between political, commercial and ideological interests in schooling, and how these seek to appropriate teachers' work, can be profoundly unsettling for educators. Nevertheless, as he rightly concludes,

Challenges to Edison and public school privatization more generally must go beyond criticisms based in effective delivery of instruction measured by test scores. It must begin to address the dangers posed to the promise of a democratic society of the unchecked expansion of corporate power and the infiltration of public schools as a crucial place for the development of a more genuinely democratic society.

(p. 206)

At heart, then, what he is on about is not the economic privatisation of schooling, *per se*, but the more debilitating and pernicious privatisation of decision framing around the social and democratic purposes of education. In New Zealand, this is evident at many levels: in the blurring of the boundaries between public and private schools through the integration of private schools that maintain their elite status only through spurious claims to 'special character'; the growing requirement by schools for parents to pay for bolt-on curriculum resources and activities that should be provided free within a fully integrated, creative learning experience for students; gate-keeping by schools to deny access to students who may be 'difficult' or who have special

educational needs and who would therefore spoil the school's 'A-C' achievement record card; and, classrooms where learning is impoverished to more easily manage assessment and reporting requirements.

All these should be matters of the broadest communal debate and contestation, not of executive fiat. Looking back nearly twenty years to the rhetoric of community participation that ushered in the *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms of schooling, it seems quite clear that the ideals of meaningful local decision-making around schooling and curriculum have been lost from the public space. They have been replaced by carefully orchestrated chatter around testing, effective teaching and school fees. As Saltman importantly reminds us, the real struggle over school privatisation lies somewhere else. We need to forget the chatter and concentrate our efforts on the more important struggles in, and for, contemporary public schooling.