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Sad, Sad School Reform

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The operation of a high school resembles the staging of a huge convention every day. A convention for hundreds, sometimes thousands, of adolescents.

Running a high school involves establishing a schedule for students to fit in their required classes. It means staff guiding students to choose courses that will accumulate the credits needed for graduation. It requires staffing classes with the right teachers and making sure room assignments are feasible for students who must pass from class to class in a few minutes. It means providing lunch for hundreds of teenagers.

The really important things at school are deeper, but they all depend on how well the event is staged. Is the curriculum challenging—literature, biology, history, Calculus, auto mechanics? Are teachers well qualified and engaging? Does each student have a personal connection with one or two adults who care? Does the school honor the cultures of all students without privileging some? Are families made welcome? Do activities make students want to come to school—sports, debate, band, choir, painting and sculpture? Does the school feel safe instead of feeling locked down?

It has become the vogue in today's school reform, a movement driven by billions of federal stimulus dollars from the U.S. Department of Education, to assume private companies can operate schools better than public school districts. One of the "turnaround" plans prescribed in President Obama's *Blueprint* for reauthorization of the federal education law is named "the restart model": "Convert or close and reopen the school under the management of an effective charter operator, charter management organization, or education management organization."

Maybe that's why the story in the mid-December *Washington Post* caught my eye: "Dunbar High Worse Off Since Contractor's Hiring," <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/14/AR2010121407696.html>. Back in 2008, then D.C. Chancellor Michelle Rhee hired a private New York City contractor to "restart" D.C.'s 822-student Dunbar High School.

Kaya Henderson, appointed last November as Rhee's replacement, fired the contractor in mid-December, because, "nearly half the senior class is not on track to graduate, more than 100 students are taking courses they've already passed and the campus is growing increasingly unsafe." When, by winter, many students are languishing in classes they have already passed, it is a sign that nobody knows the students, nobody worries about challenging them, and nobody cares enough to ensure they will graduate on time.

Defending his company's performance, Dunbar's principal said many students transfer in mid-year, and, "it takes time for new student records—especially those from charter schools—to show up in the public school data base. Students may initially be assigned to courses they've already taken."

The sad story of Dunbar High contradicts the myths that glorify privatization. The contractor doesn't even know how to stage the basics of the school day "event," and a school district that promotes charters as "the solution" has become so fragmented that records cannot be routinely processed as students transfer within the same school district. Privatization does not guarantee a school's success and reliance on contractors is not a district-wide panacea.

School reform in 2011 will continue to depend on dedicated educators creating communities where students are cared for and nurtured.

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