

## **“Table Top Theory” as a Policy Framework for Gauging the Confluence of Teaching and Private Sector Interests<sup>1</sup>**

**By Bruce A Jones**

Without question, the role of business, philanthropy, and other private sector interests in the day-to-day operation of public education has increased significantly over the past 25 years. Pundits of this phenomenon contend that a number of factors have contributed to the increase, such as public dissatisfaction with the performance of our school systems; the physical decay of the nation’s schools; public dismay over school efforts to eliminate student academic, attendance, and behavioral performance problems; and a perception that schools lack public accountability. Many of today’s schools do not look like learning centers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but rather are operated more like correctional facilities with a mission to warehouse rather than educate children. These factors are particularly true for the nation’s urban inner-city school systems. From a historical standpoint, the United States has never done well toward serving the education and economic needs of historically disenfranchised groups (such as African American, Latino, and Native American children and their families and European American children and their families who are stuck in intergenerational cycles of poverty) (Sleeter, 2003). Given these factors, there is

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a proclaimed fear by the private sector that the nation’s schools are not preparing our youth to function effectively in the workforce and global economy.

Does the private sector hold the answer to our perennial quest to attain the ideal system of public education for all children in our country? Furthermore, as we engage in this quest, what should our institutional role models be (i.e., the business and philanthropic sector, the religious sector, the military sector, or the police sector<sup>2</sup>)? And, what does this activist involvement in public education by the private sector mean for teachers and the teaching profession?

Table top theory, developed by the author, emerged as a conceptual framework for gauging and examining the role of the private sector as the author investigated the massive intervention of business and philanthropy in a school restructuring effort in the St. Louis School District between 2003 and 2004. As a result of this intervention, the St. Louis School District became the first district in U.S. history to be run by a corporate takeover firm, New York-based Alvarez & Marsal.<sup>3</sup>

## **Context for Private Sector Intervention in Public Education**

Business and philanthropy have been integrally involved in elementary and secondary education from its inception.<sup>4</sup> What is significant about the current involvement is its rapid growth over the past 25 years, since the Reagan Administration, and its level of intensity or fervor. From a public standpoint, at least three phenomena have contributed to the increased intervention of the private sector (business and philanthropy) in public school districts across America (Jones, 2007)<sup>5</sup>: (1) *The growing importance of formal education*, (2) *The growing bully pulpit role of the federal government* in public education, and (3) *A profit motive*, as school systems have become viewed as sources for amassing wealth among individuals who are tied to the multi-billion dollar school reform industry.

### ***The Growing Importance of Formal Education***

With each passing decade, the importance of education has grown exponentially. Much more is at stake with respect to the education of children and the success that they attain in adulthood. Increasingly, education has become the single most important mechanism for achieving success in our global society. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that average annual earnings increase progressively with each level of educational attainment. At the bottom of the income hierarchy are high school non-completers, who earn an average of \$18,826. High school graduates earn an average of 45 percent more at \$27,280, an insurmountable amount when compounded over a lifetime. The income discrepancy grows wider with college graduates, who earn an average of \$51,194—nearly double that of high school graduates and almost three times that of high school non-completers (Bauman & Graf, 2003).

### ***The Growing Bully Pulpit Role of the Federal Government***

The 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education's *Nation at Risk Report* (1983) brought a level of federal involvement in education that was, at the time, unprecedented. The report declared that, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war—as it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves" (p. 5). On the heels of the report, more than three-fourths of the states feverishly began work on comprehensive state action plans for school improvement (Bartell, 2001; Guthrie & Springer, 2004). At the national level, school reform efforts were driven by President G.H.W. Bush's *America 2000* initiative, President Clinton's *Goals 2000* initiative, and the current President G.W. Bush's *No Child Left Behind* initiative.

The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001<sup>6</sup> is viewed as the most activist involvement of the federal government in public education in U.S. history (Emery & Ohanian, 2004; Sergiovanni, et al, 2004). For the first time, the federal government has legislated sanctions and penalties on school districts that fail to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) as stipulated by the requirements of NCLB. These penalties include obligatory student transfer options at the district's expense, forced reallocation of district federal funding, potential principal and teacher dismissal at underperforming schools, and even external school takeover or closure (Corcoran & Goertz, 2005; Schlafly, 2003).

### ***A Profit Motive***

One of the chief methods for philanthropic intervention in the public education arena is through the financing and long-term funding of school reform packages. As a Rand study revealed, this financing has been provided through the infusion of millions of dollars of philanthropic support in school reform *prototypes* and the seed money or start-up costs that are associated with the design, development, and piloting of these prototypes in school districts across America (and in some instances, overseas). Long-term funding has been provided through a mix of philanthropic, government and business support to implement these prototypes, which are touted as *whole school* or *comprehensive school reform* packages (Glennan, 2004).

An unprecedented number of whole school or comprehensive school reform packages are now being implemented in school districts (particularly urban school districts with sizable Title I budgets).<sup>7</sup> The designers, owners, and/or representatives of these reform packages claim that they know what these districts need in the way of teacher and staff professional development, curriculum and instruction reform, and student and parent enrichment programming. Although there is documented evidence that these reform packages, as a collective, have failed (Clearinghouse on Educational Policy Management, 2004<sup>8</sup>; Comprehensive School Reform and the American Institutes for Research, 2005; Doll, 1981; Glennan, et al., 2004; Greene, 2005; McDermott, 2000; Menken, 2000; Saltman, 2005), the owners and designers

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who profit from them continue to be awarded philanthropic, business, and government support that amounts to billions of dollars. With regard to these reforms, Vernez, et al. (2004) reported, “The face validity of the concept of comprehensive school reform makes it an attractive policy initiative despite the fact that there is very little evidence to support its effectiveness.” The 29 most prominent school reform packages in the country are listed in Table One.

The “business” of school reform failure continues unabated. In a general study on school reform initiatives, Schmoker (1999, p. 37) wrote “Umpteen reforms have come and gone, using up time, money, and hope—they have left a crippling disillusionment in their wake, a cynicism about staff development and any belief that training or innovation benefits students.”

In writing about the complete failure of the \$500 million Annenberg Challenge Initiative, Loveless (2005, p. 106) wrote:

In 1993 the \$500 million effort represented the largest single gift to public education in history . . . Twelve years later, most accounts describe the results as disappointing. A 1999 report commissioned by the Challenge concluded that the award “left small yet encouraging footprints,” an accomplishment the Fordham Foundation called “less than staggering.” A series in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* described the (Annenberg) results as “mixed,” leading one commentator to retort “the lesson from Annenberg is don’t do that again.”

From week-to-week and year-to-year, teachers can only sit, wait, and wonder about the next *one size fits all* reform package that will be forced top-down on their

Table 1.  
Comprehensive School Reform Models

Accelerated Schools	America’s Choice	ATLAS Communities	Carbo Reading Style Programs	Coalition of Essential Schools	Community for Learning
Co-nect	Core Knowledge	Different Ways of Knowing	Direct Instruction Model	Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction	Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound
First Things First	High Schools That Work	High/Scope Primary Grades Approach to Education	Literacy Collaborative	Middle Start	More Effective Schools
Onward to Excellence	Quantum Learning	Turning Points	School Development Program	School Renaissance	Success for All/ Roots & Wings
Talent Development High School with Career Academies	Talent Development Middle School	Urban Learning Centers			

Source: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (2006).

school building. Seldom, if ever, do teachers, administrators and the local community<sup>9</sup> have input into the underlying concepts, design and development of these reform packages.

Consistent with this, Ravitch (2004, p. 3) laments:

Many failed and forgotten innovations continue to live in schools where they were introduced with great fanfare . . . I have often heard it said that schools are like archeological sites; digging would reveal layer after layer of fossilized school reforms and obsolete programs.

## **Past Versus Present Private Sector Involvement in Public Education**

### ***Evolving Business Role***

Within the context described above, there has been a growing involvement in public schooling of community elites from the business and philanthropic sector that is remarkably different from past involvement. Historically, community elite involvement, particularly by the business community, in school affairs was largely symbolic or limited to ceremonial events, such as the teacher of the year banquet or adopt-a-school initiatives. However, since the release of the *Nation at Risk Report* and the declaration by President Ronald Reagan that the 1980s was the decade of *Business-School Partnerships*, businesses have been at the center of school decision-making around curriculum and instruction reform, professional development for teachers and administrators, hiring and firing of school staff, school board candidate selection and elections, and the establishment of school budget priorities (Jones, 2000). At a national level, the private business and philanthropic sectors through the Business Roundtable Table (BRT) and affiliated business interest groups authored the basic principles that undergird the *America 2000*, *Goals 2000* and *No Child Left Behind* legislations of the past three presidential administrations (Berlak, 2003; Boyles, 2000; Cibulka, 2000; Emery & Ohnian, 2004; Jones, 2000). According to Emery & Ohanian (2004, p. 38):

A high-ranking leader of the Business Roundtable (BRT) admitted his commitment to beating up on public schools. . . According to this leader, "large organizations such as schools don't change because they see the light; they change because they feel the heat."

With this corporate push, school leaders who subscribe to democratic, shared, or distributive leadership models of schooling that are characteristic of site-based management or learner-centered models do so at their own peril. According to Boyles (2000), "For teachers, increasing business interest means increasing subordination and marginalization of their roles" (p. 7).

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### ***Evolving Philanthropic Role***

I characterize the history of philanthropic giving as evolving and overlapping with regard to three *giving mindsets*. The final mindset, *Investor Giving*, is of particular significance to current trends in approaches to giving and school reform:

1. The *Charitable-Giving Mindset*: This type of giving mindset does not aim to alter the status quo one way or another but it does, according to Dillick (1953, p. 29), aim to provide temporary relief to those individuals who “fall below the line of tolerable misery.”<sup>10</sup> This giving mindset is often viewed as unilateral (not involving target recipients in whether or not such giving is useful), paternalistic and sometimes even demeaning.
2. The *Grant-Giving Mindset*: This type of giving is the most prevalent type of foundation giving and is characterized as short-term in its effect. Such giving is typically not intended to result in structural change in the way that institutions operate. Impact associated with this type of giving may temporarily ameliorate a problem but it will not result in the elimination of the problem. Giving commitments of this type range from three to five years. This type of giving may or may not involve target recipients in the design and development of the initiative that is being funded. The level of involvement by the donor foundation with the day-to-day implementation of the funded initiative is minimal and grantee accountability requirements are minimal.
3. The *Investor-Giving Mindset*: This method of giving is long-term in nature and is expected to result in structural change in the way that institutions and institutional recipients operate. Giving commitments may range up to five years or more and tend to total millions of dollars. The level of involvement by the donor foundation with the implementation of the funded initiative is substantial and the expectation for achieving donor goals is high. As with the Charity Giving Model, in the education arena, there often is minimal or symbolic involvement of the targeted recipients in the design of the funded initiative because the recipients (i.e., teachers and principals) are viewed as deficient—in need of fixing—and not worthy of design input or solicitation. This sentiment is consistent with a comment from a foundation executive in Missouri who retorted, “Why involve them (school principals), they are the problem.”

There are an increasing number of philanthropic institutions that operate according to the Investor-Giving Mindset. Individual donors and philanthropic institutions are highly intertwined with business in their efforts to informally<sup>11</sup> lead and reshape public education budgets, curriculum and school personnel decisions. Recent methods of giving by some nationally based philanthropic foundations reflect this type of giving.<sup>12</sup>

### **Table Top Theory and St. Louis**

Given the growing significance of the private sector in public education, I felt the need to develop a conceptual model for understanding this phenomenon from a political and policy perspective in an actual school setting. I wanted to determine a way to map out the interactions between citizens in both sectors (public and private) that would help people to understand what went on in the St. Louis School District during and as a result of a corporate takeover.

Table top theory is embedded in the notion of the *educational ecosystem* (Comer, 2004; Goodlad, 1984; Upton, 1984). Analyses of human ecosystems enable us to examine socio-political phenomena from a broad perspective, with the understanding that what occurs in communities is a function of multiple *interdependent* factors as opposed to single and isolated factors. In this case, these interdependent factors include perceptions or world views and actions about the best way to achieve an education mission. These factors manifest in ways that lead to both formal and informal policy decision-making. *Formal* decision-making is relatively open, documented and available for public review and criticism, while *informal* decision-making manifests in a covert fashion and is often undocumented (Duke, 1989; Duke & Canady, 1991) and out of view from the lay public. Although in policy there is a tendency to overanalyze “formal” policy decision-making that is characteristic of officials who comprise the public sector (i.e., superintendent, city-mayor, state legislator, school principal, etc.), table top theory holds that it is just as important, if not more important, to analyze “informal” policy decision-making that is characteristic of “non-officials” (i.e., representatives of the corporate and philanthropic community) who operate, often unbeknownst to the lay public, with near invisibility in the private sector.

#### **Private Sector Takeover in St. Louis Schools**

In April 2003, members of a mayoral-and corporate-backed school board slate won four positions on the seven-member St. Louis school board. Once installed as the new voting majority, they awarded a \$5 million dollar one-year contract to the New York-based corporate takeover firm, Alvarez & Marsal, to manage and operate the St. Louis School District. The school board justified the hiring of the firm on the basis of the district’s dire fiscal situation.<sup>13</sup> With the official sanction of the school board, the takeover firm immediately appointed as Interim Superintendent a former Brooks Brothers clothing executive and former military official to run the day-to-day operations of the school district for the one-year contract period. Prior to the corporate takeover, the St. Louis schools were operating under a site-based model of management that appeared to be moving the district in the right academic direction. For example, although the district was provisionally accredited, all performance indicators seemed to show that the district was moving toward regaining its full accreditation status by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. In

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addition, there were no outcries from the predominantly African American community<sup>14</sup> about the direction of the district with respect to student performance and education-related responsiveness to community concerns.

However, concern was expressed from the business and philanthropic sector about the lack of responsiveness from the district’s central office and the reluctance of the Superintendent to adopt school reform and outsourcing strategies that would lead to the distribution of for-profit and non-profit external contracts. For example, with backing from the business and philanthropic<sup>15</sup> sector, the School of Business at Washington University declared that it wanted to experiment with implementing School Quality Management (SQM)<sup>16</sup> in the St. Louis School District. However, the Superintendent and his leadership team were not interested in the SQM idea. Before long, the Superintendent was encouraged to retire one year before his contract expired.

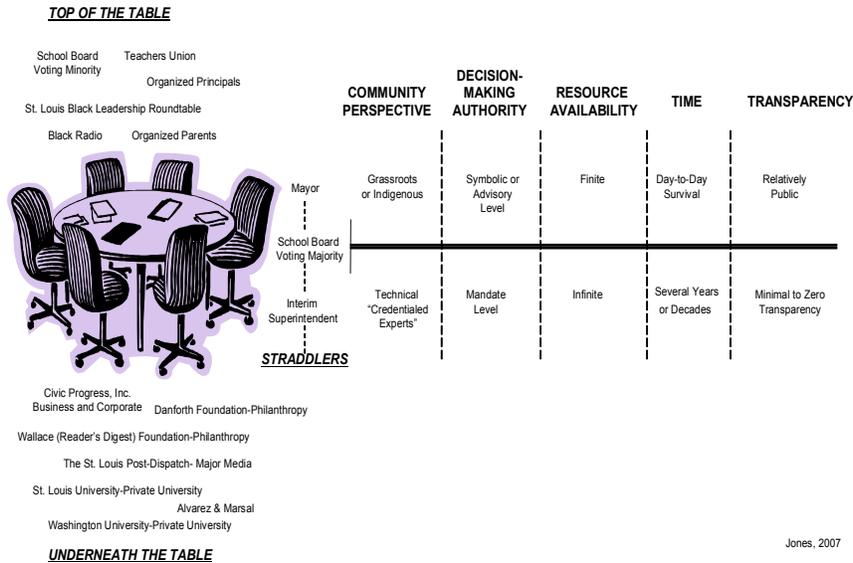
At the time of the corporate takeover, there were approximately 3,500 teachers who taught 37,653 K-12 and 1,242 preschool students in the 96 schools of the St. Louis School District. Student enrollment was predominantly African American (81 percent), followed by European American (15 percent), Hispanic American (1.6 percent), Asian American (1.5 percent), and Native American (0.1 percent). Most students (80.5 percent) were on free and/or reduced lunch.<sup>17</sup>

#### ***The End of Site-Based Management***

As previously mentioned, prior to the arrival of Alvarez & Marsal the schools in the district operated largely under a site-based management model of leadership (Clay, 1998). Under the auspices of Alvarez & Marsal, one of the first acts of the newly appointed Interim Superintendent was to terminate the site-based management director and shut down the Site-Based Management Office. The Interim Superintendent wanted to make it clear—all directives concerning budget, personnel, and curriculum were to come from central office. The firm immediately adopted a heavy-handed, top-down management style that included the issuing of unilateral edicts concerning the governance and management of the schools. Within a two-week period, the Interim Superintendent shut down 16 schools, of which 14 were located in the predominantly African-American North Side section of St. Louis. The maintenance, food service and security divisions were shut down and outsourced.<sup>18</sup> Without notice, thousands of employees—including principals, teachers, school staff, food service, maintenance, transportation and security workers—were either reassigned, told to reapply for their jobs, laid off, or outright terminated.<sup>19</sup> In a span of two weeks, the St. Louis School District was thrown into a state of turmoil and chaos. As one teacher interviewee revealed, “They (the corporate takeover firm) moved in so fast we did not know what hit us” (Jones, 2007).

Figure One provides a schematic, *Table Top Theory*, for understanding what occurred with the private sector-led takeover of the St. Louis School District. As public officials, the constituents on top of the table constitute representatives of the public sector. The activities of these constituents were relatively open and visible

Figure 1.  
Table Top Theory:  
Policymaking and Private Sector-Led School Reform in St. Louis.



because, as the school district imploded under the direction of the new school board majority and corporate takeover firm, these constituents were widely exposed in the television, radio and print media. In contrast, the non-official constituents, underneath the table, consisted of representatives of private sector institutions who were seldom seen. The lay public was largely unaware of the influence of these individuals and the pivotal roles that they played in shaping the decisions of the school board and central office.

Table top theory also reveals that there were a group of individuals who *straddled* the table. These individuals were representatives of public institutions but they appeared to be serving private interests—underneath the table. Within the educational policy arena, the mayor, Interim Superintendent and the four members of the newly elected school board majority served in “straddler” roles despite the fact that they were public officials.

**Distinctions Between Those on Top vs. Those on Bottom**

Five distinctions in perspectives or world views emerged between public officials who operated on top of the table in the more formal decision-making sphere and those private non-officials who operated underneath the table in the more informal decision-making sphere:

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1. Public official interests differed from private non-official constituent interests on the meaning of *community*;
2. Levels of *decision-making authority* held by public versus private sector constituent interests differed;
3. The levels of human, material and fiscal *resources* available to advance the education policy agenda were significantly different between those on top (public officials) and underneath (private non-officials) the table;
4. Perceptions about *time* and the significance of time to pursue and achieve an education mission also differed between public officials and private non-officials, and;
5. The levels of *transparency* and public exposure, as this concerned policymaking, differed between the two (public and private) constituency groups.

*Community as a Factor to Influence Decision-Making.* While in attendance at what could best be described as a raucous school board meeting, we observed differences between how private and public sector constituents viewed what was meant by “community.” At the request of the school board chair, a school board member, who is characterized as a *straddler*, delivered the Community Report in his role as the chair of the school board’s Community Committee.<sup>20</sup> As he delivered the report and was reading off the list of “community people” to be included in the work of the committee, a fellow school board member, who was not part of the new four member “straddler” slate, cried in protest because she was a member of the Community Committee and had never heard of these “community people.” Moreover, she wanted to know why she, as a member of the committee, was not informed about or invited to attend the Community Committee meeting. Although she was a member of the Community Committee, the first time she heard about the report was at the board meeting.

The board member delivering the committee report stumbled in his verbal attempt to address his colleague over why she was not informed about the Community Committee meeting. Ultimately he reported that there must have been a “communication mix-up” around the effort to let her know about the meeting. His response to her question about the Community Committee membership shed light on this first distinction—that is the world view held about the meaning of “community” between private sector and public sector interests. Consistent with table top theory and the “straddler” role that he played as a member of the four-person school board majority, he perceived “community” as meaning individuals who hold, for example, a Ph.D. in Community Affairs or Public Administration from places like Princeton and Harvard University. He believed that these non-local professionals could serve the best interests of the indigenous St. Louis school

community. In contrast, the protesting school board member was one of three members of the school board who, as a collective, served in the voting minority. She exclaimed that the list of “so-called community people” lacked credibility. For her, “community” had to entail grassroots, local and/or indigenous involvement. For her, this meant people like Percy Green.<sup>21</sup> Green was a prominent civil rights activist during the 1960s who was revered in the African American community. From the auditorium stage, while pointing to Green in the standing-room-only audience, she exclaimed, “That’s community!”

*Decision-Making Authority as a Factor to Influence Policy.* The highest level of policy decision-making authority is “mandate” in nature. Decision-making authority at this level can be unilateral and non-consultative or transformative and democratic. How this form of authority manifests itself is up to the individual or individuals who hold the authority. An “advisory” level of decision-making characterizes individuals who are consulted in the policy process, but the advice that they provide may or may not be followed. A “symbolic” level of decision-making occurs when individuals serve as figureheads on decision-making bodies or in the decision-making process. For example, the *investor model* of philanthropic giving strategies to school reform, discussed earlier, usually entail, at most, symbolic involvement by teachers or representatives of the education establishment. This symbolic representation creates an illusion of inclusiveness and credibility for the target audiences.

In St. Louis we observed that teachers—on top of the table—did not hold even minimal levels (advisory or symbolic) of authority in the decision-making process that was employed by the Interim Superintendent or the school board. Teachers and the teachers union were vocal about the lack of teacher input in school reform decisions at school board meetings and in the media, but their protests were ignored.

Private sector interests ensured that there were African Americans who were willing to serve in *straddler* roles with symbolic authority on the school board majority because of the demographics of the school community—which was largely (81%) African American. These African American *straddlers*<sup>22</sup> worked against the vocal concerns of the indigenous African American community. In addition, the *St. Louis Black Leadership Roundtable*<sup>23</sup> appeared to hold no authority over education reform issues during the tenure of the private sector-led reform. For example, the *Roundtable* issued a public proclamation calling on the Superintendent and the school board to slow down the school closure actions to allow community input. The proclamation was completely ignored and the school closures continued at breakneck speed.

*Resource Availability as a Factor to Influence Policy.* According to Hardy, Dohm, and Leuthold (1995), *Civic Progress, Inc.* is the venue through which elite, private sector interests manifest and unfold in the St. Louis community.<sup>24</sup> In contrast to public sector officials on top of the table, private sector non-officials held near unlimited resources at their disposal to spearhead whatever change they desired to

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advance their economic interests. To ensure that a school board was in place to support these interests, the corporate community financed the four-person school board slate that gained a majority hold of the St. Louis school board in the April 2003 school board election.<sup>25</sup> Acting in his role as a *straddler*, the mayor contributed an additional \$50,000 from his mayoral campaign fund (Wilson, 2003).

In contrast, teachers, school staff and school administrators on top of the table struggled from day-to-day with meager resources to operate their schools, as enrichment programs, which were once under the direction of the schools through a site-based model, were terminated. Because of the centralization of authority in the Office of the Interim Superintendent, resources were not forthcoming to purchase school supplies or textbooks or engage students in field trips or after-school enrichment programming.

*Time as a Factor to Influence Policy.* In sorting through the archives at the Missouri Western Historical Society in St. Louis, we discovered how strategies employed by private sector non-officials to bring about change may be long-term in nature. On a broad scale, for example, organizations such as *Civic Progress, Inc.* may engage in planning that is cross-generational in nature. Such planning may have implications for how a social, political and economic infrastructure of a city unfolds for years to come.

Much of what was going on in the St. Louis education community had been decided much earlier. For example, years earlier the city’s elites lobbied the state legislature to reduce the size of the St. Louis school board from 12 to seven members. Few in the community considered the significance of this action until the aftermath of the 2003 school board elections, when the corporate-driven four-person slate won the school board majority and hired Alvarez & Marsal to run the district. Clearly it would have been more difficult to achieve a majority on the school board if the membership of the board had remained at 12 members.

In contrast, constituents on top of the table tended to be caught in the perennial *gerbil in a cage syndrome*—just trying to exist one day at a time. Policy subsistence would have been an appropriate phrase to characterize planning at this level. Planning for a week would have been considered a luxury—years and decades would have been out of the question. This latter point was particularly true when teachers, staff and administrators did not know from day to day whether or not they would be transferred, reassigned or fired. Hill and Celio (1998) report that urban school districts “are generally in desperate straits financially, managerially and educationally” (p. 62)—it is about daily survival.

*Transparency as a Factor to Influence Policy.* The workings of private sector non-officials and the actions they commit in the education arena receive minimal exposure in the public. On a national level, for example, Green (2005) and Stanfield (1985) report how little the public knows about the role of philanthropy in society despite the enormous impact this sector has on public policy. Throughout their schooling years, students are taught a great deal about the role of public

officials (i.e., government sector) in designing, shaping and implementing public policy. In contrast, little if any time is devoted to teaching students about the significance of the impact of the private sector (non-officials) on education, economic and social policy.

The traditional media is often viewed as a venue to foster transparency around the work of public and private policymakers who engage in formal and informal decision-making concerning the public interest. However, in St. Louis this was not the case. The major daily newspaper, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, was not widely respected or trusted by representatives of the school community and, in general, the African American community. The paper was viewed as an arm of corporate and private interests because coverage of the corporate takeover firm and school board actions was seldom presented in a balanced way. In one instance, hundreds of parents (standing room only) attended a rally at a community center to protest the actions of the school board and the corporate takeover firm. Several local politicians and religious leaders attended and spoke at the rally. Despite the prominence of the event in the local community, the *Post-Dispatch* chose not to cover the event.<sup>26</sup>

### **Legacy of Private Sector-Led School Reform**

The calls by the business and philanthropic sector to seize control of the St. Louis School District because of the district's dire fiscal state was somewhat analogous to the charge of *weapons of mass destruction* in Iraq as the rationale for going to war. Just as the latter charge was false, we also learned that the former was false. The foundation upon which the four-person school board majority and corporate takeover firm operated was inherently flawed by the lack of credibility. The private sector-led reform in St. Louis promulgated *crash and burn* policy strategies that benefited a few, from a financial standpoint, and left a devastating legacy for the masses of children and their families in the city. This devastation unmasked itself with private sector-led actions concerning: (1) The district's budget status; (2) The policymaking decision process, (3) School closures, and (4) The school district's academic and operational state accreditation rating.

### **Budget Expenditures**

As previously mentioned, the rationale used by the school board for contracting with the corporate takeover firm, Alvarez & Marsal, was the claim that the district faced a \$70 million deficit due to financial mismanagement, but a state audit revealed that the deficit was actually \$38 million and caused as a direct result of cuts in state funding allocations to the district (McCaskill, 2004). Therefore, the deficit was exaggerated and not the result of incompetence by the outgoing-retiring Superintendent. Finally, although the primary purpose of awarding the \$5 million contract to Alvarez & Marsal was to eliminate the district's operating deficit, the \$38 million deficit reportedly remained after the departure of the firm in 2004 (Gehring, 2004).

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### ***Decision-Making in the District***

Prior to the election of the school board majority in April 2003, non-officials in the business and philanthropic sector were demanding that schools be more accountable and transparent about strategies aimed at improving the performance of the school district. However, once installed, the newly elected school board majority, working in concert with the corporate takeover firm and private sector interests, operated in virtual secrecy. There appeared to be deliberate and calculated attempts by the Interim Superintendent and school board to circumvent the state Sunshine Laws. Often teachers, principals and the lay public were unaware of board policy decisions until these decisions were announced at school board meetings, without the benefit of public hearings.<sup>27</sup> An onslaught of private sector-led decisions were made concerning curriculum and instruction; school operations, such as transportation and food services; school closures; and the conferral of what could only be characterized as lucrative consulting and vendor contracts. There was minimal transparency and no rationales presented to the public on how and why these decisions were made.

Teachers were completely in the dark concerning curriculum and instructional strategies that were being developed in the central office for implementation at the school sites.<sup>28</sup> In addition, viable professional development opportunities for teachers and principals were wiped out. These actions were consistent with the modus operandi of the private sector-led reform, that is, teachers, principals and school staff are not to “think” they are to simply “do what they are told.”

### ***School Closures***

One of the chief rationales articulated by the Interim Superintendent for closing 16 schools within a two-week period was because the schools were deemed as underutilized or failing. Yet at least one high-achieving elementary school (Waring Elementary), which was utilized appropriately, was closed and the children moved to overcrowding schools that remained open. In the wake of this closing, it was discovered that St. Louis University wanted the high-performing elementary school razed so that it could build a new basketball stadium.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Academic Impact***

During the tenure of the corporate takeover firm, the school district’s accreditation status plummeted. Before the corporate takeover firm arrived, the district was two points away from regaining a full accreditation rating from the State of Missouri. One year later (June 2004), upon the departure of the takeover firm, the district fell 25 points short of regaining its full accreditation rating and was just two points away from becoming fully unaccredited (St. Louis Post-Dispatch Editorial, 2004).

### ***Public Outcry***

Amid massive public calls for the removal of the St. Louis school board and

demands for the State Education Commissioner to intervene, the school district's 3,500-member teaching force voted in December 2004 to strike. Despite the 1,427-225 vote in favor of a walkout, the embattled school board threatened to administer disciplinary action to teachers who failed to report to work at the start of the new year (Howard, 2004b). Ultimately the teacher strike was averted when the school board made the decision to enter into negotiations with the teachers union.

### **Implications for Teaching and the Teaching Profession**

The school reforms exemplified by the private sector-led actions in the St. Louis School District fly in the face of student and adult learning. Teachers who find themselves in an institutional culture that is driven solely by a lack of ethics or a for-profit motive must do all they can do in their own classrooms to protect children from such a culture. Because the involvement of the private sector in educational policy is not likely to diminish, given current trends, teachers and the teaching profession can no longer operate as if schools and classrooms are in a vacuum. Teachers and representatives of higher education institutions who prepare the teaching force must do all that they can to understand the formal and informal dynamics of educational policy decision-making and to challenge policymakers who intentionally or unintentionally do harm to the mission to educate all children. Educators must work on a structural as opposed to symbolic commitment to this mission.

As previously reported, the United States has never done well in educating all children—particularly African American children who attend schools in our nation's urban inner cities. Our failure to effectively address this reality created a void for private sector interests to fill. As teachers, in partnership with school principals and school staff, take responsibility and leadership over the strategies that are needed to advance education for all children, it is important to look beyond the obvious for solutions. You must examine and understand the not-so-obvious. Consistent with a chief message of *Table Top Theory*—it is vital to step back from the daily pressures and lift up the policy table cloth; look under the table and be aware of and understand what is really going on with all efforts to structurally alter our education system. Such efforts, for good and bad, have impacted and will continue to impact teaching and the teaching profession. Gaining a full understanding of the total educational ecosystem today—above, below, and all around the policy table—is the first step to finding workable solutions to advancing education for all children.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This is to express appreciation to Nathan D. Jackson, who was invaluable to our data collection efforts in the St. Louis School District.

<sup>2</sup> In my state, consistent with policing terminology, the Florida Department of Education

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used the acronym “SWAT” (School Wide Assistance Teams) to describe the battalion of state-supported experts who will be dispatched throughout the state to turn failing schools around.

<sup>3</sup> Corporate takeover firms traditionally operate within the private sector. Such firms take over the management and administration of businesses that are in fiscal distress, with the primary goal of returning the business to fiscal solvency. Prior to St. Louis, Alvarez & Marsal had no experience in school management. Since the St. Louis experience, the firm has secured a \$17 million no-bid contract to engage in its “turnaround” work in the New York City school system (Freedman, 2006), and earlier in the year (January 2006) the firm secured a \$16.8 million no-bid contract to manage and administer all operational facets of the New Orleans school system (Capochino, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> See McCarthy (1982) and Stanfield (1985) concerning this historical involvement.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, Cibulka (2000, p. 17) wrote that “Urban communities in the United States will experience a dramatic growth in the involvement of “civic and political elites” in public education that will be unprecedented in history. This involvement, he reported, will have more of an impact on public education than individuals who pressed for urban education reform during the Civil Rights Era. These elites are more powerful, more connected, and are comprised of community power brokers from the corporate, philanthropic, major media, and upper echelon government sectors.”

<sup>6</sup> NCLB also reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965.

<sup>7</sup> School reform package advocates lobbied the U.S. Congress to amend Title I legislation to allow school districts to use Title I monies to fund their school reform packages. The advocates succeeded in their lobbying efforts with the Congressional passage of the *Comprehensive School Reform Act* of 1997. Annually an estimated \$150 million is allocated to these comprehensive school reform packages via school districts that serve as contract conduits as a result of this legislation (Ilg & Massucci, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> According to the Clearinghouse, advocates of these packages attribute the failure of comprehensive or whole school reform not to the reforms themselves but to poorly designed studies that assess the influence of the reforms, faulty implementation of the reforms and/or lack of school support (such as recalcitrant teachers and administrators).

<sup>9</sup> A study by the Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center and the American Institutes for Research (2005) revealed that the comprehensive school reform initiatives scored “zero to limited” on demonstrating an effective impact on school reform and “parent, family and community involvement.” This is the case despite the fact that it is well-documented that advancements in student achievement entail inclusive approaches that must involve parent, family and community involvement (see Comer, 2004 on this latter point).

<sup>10</sup> The “charity” sentiment is expressed in 1872 by businessman Charles G. Trusdell who, in exasperation, determined that, “Charity has a twofold character. It is the practical expression of sympathy with the afflicted, and the price society pays for its own safety” (McCarthy, 1982; p. 68).

<sup>11</sup> The word “informal” is critical because business and philanthropy cannot legally, in a “formal” sense, lead schools and school districts. The “formal” leadership of schools and school districts falls under the purview of state legislatures and local school boards.

<sup>12</sup> See Colvin, R.L.(2005). Colvin discusses the relatively new and massive dollar “investments” as opposed to “grants” in public education by the Walter Annenberg Foundation; the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and, the most recent newcomer, the Eli Broad Foundation.

<sup>13</sup> The newly elected school board majority claimed that the district was facing a \$70 million

deficit. In support of this claim, the mayor declared that the outgoing-retiring Superintendent “spent money like a drunken sailor.” However, an independent state audit revealed otherwise. According to the state audit, the district actually had a \$38 million deficit that was the direct result of cuts in state funding allocations to the district (McCaskill, 2004). The outgoing Superintendent was, contrary to the political rhetoric of the mayor and newly elected school board, quite thrifty.

<sup>14</sup> Eighty-one percent of the children in the St. Louis School District are African American.

<sup>15</sup> The philanthropic institutions included the New York-based Wallace Foundation and the St. Louis-based Danforth Foundation.

<sup>16</sup> SQM was touted as a variation of Total Quality Management (TQM). At a Wallace Foundation leadership and training meeting for St. Louis school principals, which was held at Washington University, the Dean of the Business School revealed, “This SQM was tried up in Chicago with mixed results and we want to give it a whirl here in St. Louis.” As was the case with Alvarez & Marsal, the School of Business at Washington University had no experience working in the public school sector or in an urban school setting.

<sup>17</sup> Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Core Data: As submitted by Missouri Public Schools.

<sup>18</sup> Outsourcing to private vendors as a means of providing public school services is a growing phenomenon across the country. In New York City, for example, the Office of the Public Advocate revealed that a total of eight no-bid vendor contracts valued at \$1.3 million were conferred in 2001. By 2003 (two years later), the number of contracts conferred jumped to 69—totaling more than \$56 million (Freedman, 2006).

It should be noted that one of the many reported recommendations in a report that was released in December 2006 by the *Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce* is to “put independent (private) contractors in charge of operating schools, though the schools would remain public. States would oversee funding” (Zuckerbrod, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> In November 2003, with the sanction of the school board, the Interim Superintendent awarded a five-year, \$55 million contract to Sodexo, Inc. to take over the district’s custodial and facilities division and awarded a four-month (March-June 2004) \$7.2 million contract to Aramark Corporation to take over the district’s food operations. The latter contract was conferred despite knowledge that Aramark had been linked to food poisoning incidents at other educational facilities and, ironically, correctional institutions across the country. In the first month of Aramark’s operation, cafeteria food service was suspended in 13 schools in the St. Louis district because of reported incidents of students becoming ill. Despite this, the school board held on to the option of renewing the Aramark contract for the 2004-2005 school year at a disclosed amount of \$16.3 million.

<sup>20</sup> The St. Louis School Board established the Community Committee as a result of near-rioting within the largely African American community because of the failure of the board and the Interim Superintendent to include representatives of the community in decision-making about the education fate of their children.

<sup>21</sup> As we sat across the aisle from Percy Green in the Vashon High School auditorium, where the school board meeting was being held, he was bodily dragged out by the police at the order of the school board chair for inciting chants of protest against school board actions in the auditorium audience. Upon being grabbed, Green immediately fell into the limp, body-passive resistance mode.

<sup>22</sup> In addition to the criticism of the failure of the African American straddlers to address the concerns of the indigenous African American community, another criticism stemmed from

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the knowledge that these straddlers had no children enrolled in the St. Louis School District. Therefore they were viewed as incapable of empathizing with parents who did have children enrolled in the district.

<sup>23</sup> The *St. Louis Black Leadership Roundtable* is the primary organization in the St. Louis region that is devoted to comprehensive analysis and action that advances the economic, health and education well-being of the African American community.

<sup>24</sup> *Civic Progress, Inc.*, consists of the Chief Executive Officers of the largest corporations in the St. Louis region. The organization, which was founded in 1953, is considered the shadow government of St. Louis. The purpose of the organization is to ensure that government maintains a posture and policy that is in line with the private economic interests of the corporate sector.

<sup>25</sup> *Civic Progress, Inc.* contributed more than \$200,000 to the four-candidate slate. More specifically, contributor sources included Anheuser-Bush, Ameren, Emerson Electric and Energizer Eveready Battery.

<sup>26</sup> This is similar to another point in history when the *Post-Dispatch* chose not to cover a significant event in the local community. Most Americans and historians are unaware of the fact that the first civil rights lunch counter sit-ins in the United States occurred in St. Louis in 1947, 13 years before the famous Greensboro, North Carolina sit-ins. According to Kimbrough and Dagen (2000), the decision by the editors of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* to not cover the sit-ins in 1947 led to the omission of this civil rights history from U.S. historical memory. A retired *Post-Dispatch* reporter revealed in 1990 that as a young reporter in 1947, he was eager to report on the lunch counter sit-ins, but was told by his editor—“The newspaper knows all about it and there’s no need for a story.”

<sup>27</sup> There were early attempts by the Interim Superintendent and school board to cancel or avoid timely public announcements of school board meetings. However, to their chagrin, such attempts violated state law.

<sup>28</sup> One such action occurred when teacher leaders who were serving in the role of instructional coordinators at the school sites were relieved of their duties without notice. These instructional coordinators were vital to the emerging efforts by the school principals to develop “leadership teams” in their schools in order to adopt school-wide approaches to student achievement.

<sup>29</sup> St. Louis University is landlocked and had been reportedly eyeing the school property for years (Downs, 2004).

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