

# Shaking the Money Tree

*Many business people are amazingly gullible in believing that more funding is needed for schools.*

**By Sol Stern**

I have often wondered why it is so rare to hear the voices of business people supporting even the most reasonable reforms in the public schools — such as making it possible to fire incompetent teachers or paying teachers commensurately with their knowledge and performance rather than their seniority.

Typical, however, of the kinds of initiatives that business executives support is the “Principal for a Day” program, sponsored by an organization called PENCIL (Public Education Needs Civic Involvement in Learning). The founding genius behind PENCIL is Lisa Belzberg, daughter of one of Canada’s richest families and wife of Matthew Bronfman, son of Canadian tycoon Edgar Bronfman.

Although Belzberg sends her own children to an exclusive Jewish day school, she bubbles with enthusiasm about the public schools. “I truly believe in the notion of public education in this country”, she once told me. “It is the one place where everyone can be accepted.”

In the past few years, companies such as NBC and HBO have poured millions of dollars of computers, books, and furniture into their assigned schools through Principal for a Day. There is little evidence, however, that their gifts have brought about any systemic school improvement.

To find out more, I decided to volunteer as a Principal for a Day during the last year of the Clinton administration. I joined about 1,000 business executives, along with a few luminaries including First Lady Hillary Clinton, just recently arrived in New York.

I found, alas, that the businessmen left their managerial smarts in the office when they signed up for a day in the public schools. They came to their schools with the best of intentions and bearing gifts, yet unwillingly they conspired in propping up an indefensible, failing system.

After we had all spent the day at our assigned schools, we Principals for a Day, plus many of the real principals, were invited for a town hall meeting. It soon became clear that the event was part political rally and part revival meeting to drum up support for the New York City education status quo and for the people who run it.

When concern was voiced that many dedicated and talented teachers were leaving for the suburbs, Chancellor Rudy Crew agreed and called for much higher salaries for New York teachers. The audience broke into applause.

None of the business executives in attendance evidently thought there was anything unusual about the CEO of the public school system stating in public that his employees should get a huge raise, no questions asked.

Then the chief of the principals’ union stood up to say that the city’s talented principals were also leaving for the suburbs and should also get more money. More applause.

The same executives, of course, would have laughed if, back in their home offices, someone had proposed that they should give a giant raise to each and every one of their existing managers, regardless of merit.

Calls followed for more federal and state money for maintenance of existing schools and construction of new schools. More applause.

Everyone in the room seemed to have erased from his memory banks the fact that hundreds of millions of dollars in school construction money had disappeared into a dark hole because of the featherbedding work rules and rank incompetence at the Board of Education.

Instead of trying to figure out how to eliminate the waste that virtually defines the system, the assembled executives were applauding a proposal to keep shoveling money to the very people responsible for the failure.

It went on like this for 40 minutes, as one after another of these highly-successful men and women stood up and heaped praise on the “hardworking” and “dedicated” people who were doing such a great job of educating our children. Were they talking about the same school system that I had gotten to know so well as a parent?

The system that virtually guarantees lifetime jobs for all its teachers, regardless of how much they work? The system in which fewer than half the children who enter high school manage to graduate in four years? The system in which 67% of all grade 4 students can’t pass a very basic reading test?

I was dumbfounded by the iron curtain of denial among these shrewd, talented individuals. In a more personal way, I was angered. Few of the executives who were gushing about the schools they visited would actually consider sending their own children to those schools, just as Hillary Clinton hadn’t sent her daughter to a Washington, DC public school.

I didn’t begrudge those wealthy executives the extra money they spent on their children’s private schooling. What I had wanted for my children’s schools had nothing to do with money.

Although I can understand why the teachers’ union keeps demanding more and more money for the system, it is exasperating to hear from business people that money is the key to school improvement.

Everything I learned in my sons’ schools refuted this. It was a matter of observation and simple common sense that our public schools need fresh ideas, innovation, and competition, not money.

*(Adapted with permission from Breaking Free. Mr. Stern is a journalist and the father of two boys who attended New York public schools.)*