In this short volume, Anthony Picciano and Joel Spring offer us an important and disturbing book. While readers may not be much surprised to learn that the major players who define the trajectories of education change are seldom independent or dispassionate experts, the authors breathe life into their subject by describing in considerable detail the shadowy nexus of policy influences. As Picciano and Spring demonstrate, education policy is routinely driven by a confluence of interests that define as profit, ideology and faith that technology holds the key to our future. Far from a conspiracy in which a ruling elite dictate policy, Picciano and Spring document a sea of agents who regularly traverse back and forth between the think tanks, foundations, publishers, technology companies and the government agencies ostensibly designed to regulate education. They dub these agents “flexians,” well-connected individuals who share common notions about what works and what should be encouraged. The directions toward which they would march education are organically tied to the motives of their organizational connections as well as their “community” of networked interests. Flexians do not constitute a conspiracy that speaks with a single
voice, but they have nonetheless succeeded in capturing ever more aspects of education.

Much of the detail in the Picciano and Spring account comes directly from the pronouncements, marketing materials, and position papers of the organizations under study. For example, we hear Education Industry Association trumpet that, “education is rapidly become a $1 trillion industry,” and we are presumably in a much better position to understand the significance of the federal No Child Left Behind’s frequent and approving invocation of “for profit” education service providers. Such providers include a bevy of companies that seek to profit from education by offering everything from tutoring services, test production and evaluation, food and beverage supply, educational content providers, and also educational management organizations (EMOs) designed to take control over failing public schools and districts.

That private actors seek personal profit through public education is hardly news. Indeed, Picciano and Spring document the long history of profitable allures created by new technological waves. For example, early in the twentieth century radio was touted as potential savior for the classroom. Since that time public education has endured numerous debates about the extent to which commercial organizations and social entrepreneurship might accommodate the public purpose. From Teletubbies to MathBlasters, the stream of for-profit ventures continues into the current era, continuously testing the limits to which private enterprise can be relied upon to promote the general welfare. What is new now is that the very boundaries defining whether private actors do or don’t serve the public are increasingly controlled by those selfsame private interests which have successfully inserted themselves into the heart of our core policy making networks.

Picciano and Spring document how foundations from Gates, Walton, Broad attempt to assure private and non-profit influence on public education policy and finance. In just one example, we are informed that along with the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation the Gates Foundation underwrites the Broad Residency, which defines itself as “a management development program that places talented executives with private and civic sector experience and advanced degrees from top business, public policy and law schools into two-year full-time paid positions at the top levels of urban schools districts, state and federal departments of education and leading charter
management organizations (p. 24).” Such interventions would be less troubling if the collective efforts by foundations were either unambiguously positive or had limited impact. Unfortunately, neither appears to be the case. Instead, as public policy accommodates itself to private interests, the evidence regarding their effects on students is, at best, mixed and sometimes damning. By now many understand that the widely controversial No Child Left Behind initiative provides great encouragement for choice, charters and profiteers. Major studies now conclude that charters have failed to demonstrate greater efficacy than public schooling, despite greater autonomy and greater selectivity granted them. Online education, a similarly new private opportunity for technology, foundation and corporate interests, as of yet can only proclaim that learning outcomes among completers are not significantly different from those of non-completers. Much more damning, however, it is clear that non-completers are vastly more prevalent in online courses and that low income and at-risk populations are more apt to be among those left behind. Yet the drive for profit, economies and choice increasingly target school districts with the poor records and the greatest numbers of at-risk students.

Picciano and Spring spend relatively little time discussing teacher unions, even though these entities are frequently the target of the flexians who denounce their influence. Indeed, unions remain the one of the few major points of resistance to the flexion networks. While this relative absence is a potential weakness, their study still serves to counterbalance the increasingly well-publicized efforts of less visible foundations, corporations, and think tanks to reduce teacher influence on education. On the other hand, Picciano and Spring do take account of both conservative and liberal think tanks that attempt to influence policy with paid studies and issue advocacy. Conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation have a clear ideological orientation that ties their financial support towards specific outcomes. Heritage announces itself as a “research and educational institution—a think tank—whose mission is to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values and a strong national defense (p. 129).” Indeed, their explicitly enterprise and choice oriented agenda loops them into an influential network that includes the American Enterprise Institution, the Hoover
Institution, the Fordham Foundation, as well numerous less overtly motivated think tanks and foundations.

At best, this short review can only suggest the flavor of Picciano and Spring’s book. The impact of their text resides in its extensive documentation both of the confluence of interests among ideological think tanks, technology and for-profit enterprise and of the ways their invisible networks have pushed private concerns to the top of level of educational policy. These make their work an incredibly important primer. While it is true that the book often blurs distinctions between the pronouncements of organizational goals and the evidence of their effects, their investigation makes it abundantly clear that there is an unmistakable policy drift towards relatively untested propositions heavily driven by ideological concerns that just so happen also to yield huge potential gains for particular private actors.

About the Reviewer

Dan Jacoby
Harry Bridges Endowed Chair in Labor Studies Emeriti
University of Washington
United States
jacoby@uwash.edu

Dan Jacoby is a University of Washington Harry Bridges Endowed Chair in Labor Studies Emeriti, and is part of the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences and Masters in Policy Studies. Jacoby studies and publishes on the intersections between education and labor.