Funding of Military Academies Deprives General Public Education

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By CRAIG B. MOUSIN

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The fundamental incompatibility of partnering military academies with pubic school education forces public school officials to betray their own principles to the detriment of our students and schools. Unfair recruiting advantages, violations of non-discrimination principles, disparate funding and availability of resources, denial of choice and blatant disregard of the democratic principles under girding public education reveal the inherent quandary when public school officials partner with the military to educate our youth.

Chicago Public Schools and the Pentagon deny that JROTC programs constitute recruiting of our youth. Of course they say that because they are not permitted to recruit. As former Chief of Staff, Gen. Eric K. Shinseki testified before Congress, "We don't recruit them, as you know, we're not permitted to do that, but...about 30 percent of them end up joining the Army." By their very presence in our schools, JROTC military academies recruit. And why not-all our schools should be proud of what makes each unique-why should not JROTC leaders proclaim what makes them distinctive? But when JROTC academies proclaim their strengths, they are simultaneously recruiting. Gen. Shinseki told us they cannot recruit, but they reap recruiting's rewards.

Of course to do so, they must distort their words. Admiral Michael Mullen, chest ablaze with ribbons, meets with Rickover Naval Academy (RNA) cadets to discuss "careers in the Navy." In Orwellian fashion, CPS denies that he was recruiting and instead claims he was merely providing the cadets with "information" about the Navy.

Similarly, the Chicago JROTC web page includes a link proudly proclaiming that 40 percent of Naval JROTC graduates join the service and 58 percent go into ROTC or military academies in college-programs that require subsequent military service. Why brag of such great numbers on a CPS linked website? They are promoting JROTC...
as a good investment to parents, students and Congress. The fundamental incompatibility of placing a military academy within a public school establishes this paradox of claiming that no recruitment occurs while at the same time CPS sells the power of this education to provide careers in the military.

CPS tells us that public education is under funded and requests parents to lobby Springfield for additional funding. Yet, as the American Friends Service Committee has documented, school districts lose money on JROTC programs. We subsidize the Pentagon with each new JROTC academy. In FY 2006, RNA expended $1.820 million for 10 students or $16,549 per student, far exceeding CPS’ average expenditure for students of approximately $7,000 per student. In FY 2008, RNA’s projected cost approaches almost $9,000 per cadet- almost 30 percent higher than the CPS average student annual cost. These figures do not even include the cost of CPS’ military office and its sophisticated web page. Public education should be equal education. That goal is subverted when we develop costly programs that are counter to the principles of public education.

When funding of the JROTC programs exceeds general education support, when RNA receives new science labs and equipment and Senn students must used outdated equipment, and smaller class sizes further expand JROTC benefits, such equality cannot be assured or even hoped to be attained. Our history has long told us that separate, but equal has never been equal. Indeed, RNA’s funding advantage demonstrates how we fail to learn the lessons of our past and betray the principles of equal public education.

Finally, mixing public education with a military education abdicates leadership responsibilities and eviscerates liberties that civilians should exercise in our Republic. In his farewell address, President Dwight Eisenhower warned us, “We must guard against the acquisitions of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.” He urged resolution in avoiding the domination of our scholars by the threat of federal dollars dictating research and agendas. There is even greater concern if those federal dollars influence our school districts desperate for funds to adopt programs that violate their mission and principles.

We have witnessed the erosion of democracy with the imposition of military academies in Chicago. The Senn Local School Council, the elected body responsible for Senn, voted unanimously to oppose RNA. CPS ignored that vote. Subsequently, a community task force hand picked by Ald. Mary Ann Smith, 48th, in conjunction with CEO Duncan voted overwhelmingly requesting a moratorium on RNA.

Duncan refused to honor that vote and Ald. Smith unilaterally disbanded the Task Force over the objection of a majority of its members. Community members then sought a public referendum on the RNA decision. Despite intense electioneering by Smith opposing that referendum, over 69 percent of the voters asked CPS to reconsider its decision. Both the CPS and the Alderman ignored the public’s will. The Board of Education disregards frequent citizen testimony against RNA including the concern that the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy violates CPS non-discrimination policies. President Eisenhower’s fears found fruition in Chicago when such misplaced power denied the community’s will as exercised through its regularly constituted bodies and electoral decision making.

Thus, this partnership of military and public education forces CPS to betray the very principles it claims to support. Recruiting happens by mere presence and pride of institution; discriminatory policies creep into the CPS and undermine the commitment to non-discrimination; funding disparities foil honest choice and tempt parents and children to make decisions based on skewed opportunities; and the power of the Local School Councils are eviscerated and the will of the people ignored.

No military necessity calls for these JROTC academies-the military “assures” us they do not recruit our students. Therefore, let us avoid betraying our most important principles of public education by ending CPS partnerships with the JROTC academies.

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