

## Backpack Full of Cash

November 13, 2018

Federation has hosted the first Australian public screening of *Backpack Full of Cash*, a documentary that explores the American education reform movement and its impact on public education.

Directed and co-produced by former teacher Sarah Mondale, and co-produced and edited by Vera Aronow, the film shows the stark reality of America's charter school movement — which provides public funding for independently operated schools, including for-profit schools — as well as voucher systems that allow parents to use public funding for private and religious education.

The documentary, screened on 2 November, explored the nature of charter school operation and marketing, how many of them engaged in dishonest practices such as taking in students with additional needs in order to secure funding and then exclude or expel students after funding had been secured.



Similar practices occurred in states and jurisdictions that connected school funding to performance in standardised tests, focusing recruitment and enrolment campaigns on students from middle-class backgrounds who were more likely to achieve higher test scores, and leaving disadvantaged students to attend decreasing numbers of public schools.

Inevitably, such strategies also result in high levels of racial segregation between schools and systems, as educational attainment is strongly correlated with socio-economic advantage, which is divided along racial lines in many communities.

One section of the film that prompted particularly strong reactions from the audience on the night detailed the existence of publicly funded religious schools that are allowed to teach their own curriculum, and so teach creationism in place of science education.

In an interview, the principal of one such school also spoke of the school's policy of corporal punishment saying that they regularly "bop" the kids. The principal defended this practice saying "the bible says it won't kill a kid, if you do it right".

The operation of "cyber charter" schools was also explored, depicting children sitting alone in their bedrooms, engaging in lessons on a computer through voice chat with a teacher who was talking them through power point presentations as their lesson.

In one moment, a student is sitting at their computer while their teacher's infant child can be heard crying while the teacher tries to deliver a lesson, and the teacher apologises for the noise and interruption.

Mondale and Aronow attended the event to kick off a week-long tour of east coast AEU branches. After the

Sydney screening they were joined by Education International project director and former Federation senior vice president Angelo Gavrielatos for a panel discussion about the ongoing global efforts against privatised and corporatised education.

Federation is working with the filmmakers to secure distribution rights for screenings to be held around NSW.

— Cameron Malcher, Editor