

Elitism in Chicago

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Yesterday in Wisconsin, public-employee unions and their supporters [failed to recall](#) the aggressively anti-labor governor Scott Walker. Today in Chicago, public school teachers [are voting](#) on strike authorization as part of their ongoing struggle with mayor Rahm Emanuel and the school board.

To be clear, [the teachers aren't striking](#). They're voting to authorize a hypothetical future strike, as a negotiating tactic. No one wants to see classroom learning grind to a halt and working parents stuck with unexpected child-care duties.

And, while I'm not one to defend the teachers unions' every single move, I'm tired of seeing public education set up to fail and then blamed for its own failure, with special blame always reserved for teachers. And I'm especially irked by the stunning elitism of successful, often private-school-educated people promoting a vision of public ed as a lean factory operation for turning out human widgets ready to take their small place in what's left of the economic machine.

The video below offers some striking insight into this variety of elitism. First, some background for all you people from not-Chicago.

Among other things, the Chicago Teachers Union [is fighting for](#) "art, music, world languages and physical education instructors and classes in every single school." School board members in Chicago aren't elected; they're handpicked by the mayor. Last year, Emanuel [appointed billionaire and Democratic fundraising heavyweight Penny Pritzker to the board](#). Pritzker attended the Lab School, an elite private school affiliated with the University of Chicago.

Now, watch this speech by trial lawyer and public-school parent Matt Farmer:

Of course, a journalist couldn't *really* conduct an interview in the form of a cross examination, not least because the subject could always just walk away. That professional quibble aside, Farmer's anger is righteous and incisive.

In other depressing Chicago news, the city council--an elected body that's less squarely in the mayor's pocket than the school board, but not much less--[approved a \\$5 million public subsidy to Pritzker's family](#) to get them to build a Hyatt a few blocks from the University of Chicago and the Lab School (in my old neighborhood). This in the immediate wake of [Emanuel's plan to save just \\$3 million](#) via drastic cuts to mental health services, an idea both cruel and [shortsighted](#).

Chicago's a beautiful and vibrant place. It's also a place where progressives perpetually feel unrepresented by any major party.