

**A Nation at Risk to Win the Future: The State of Public Education in the U.S.**

**Timothy Scott**

*University Of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts, USA*

## **Introduction**

At the time of writing this article, a convergence of political, economic and cultural forces are launching an intensive frontal assault on the public sector in the United States. Business beholden lawmakers of both political parties are inflaming fears of greater economic hardship and budget deficits as a rationale to further gut essential public and social services for poor and working people while aggressively slashing public sector jobs, wages and benefits. Even in the face of popular opposition, a growing number of states and municipalities are enacting legislation to severely limit or eliminate union rights for public workers under the pretext of economic stability and growth.

In step with lawmakers, corporate “news” sources are dutifully fulfilling their hegemonic function of providing the rationales for economic austerity measures from a script that reinforces the primacy of unfettered capitalism. Within this prevailing narrative, the role of government is to create and enforce the social conditions that enable the interests of Wall Street to prevail over the collective good. To this end, liberal and conservative authorities alike are portraying public sector employee compensation and working conditions as contemptibly overgenerous when compared with non-union, contingent, low-wage, non-benefitted private sector jobs, which represent the labor standards to be replicated universally. In constructing this deliberately divisive storyline; municipal, state and federal workers are being vilified as un-American, essentially stealing wealth and prosperity from the nation.

These events are occurring during a period of time when banks and corporations responsible for the most recent economic collapse received massive government bailouts, many of which are now thriving more than ever, and corporate profits on a whole are at an all time high. Military spending is higher now than at any point since World War II as a means to build and maintain a much-despised empire abroad, and despite a major recession, the wealthiest Americans have grown even richer. Meanwhile, the sitting Democratic president is all too eager to emulate Ronald Reagan and appease the U.S. Chamber of Commerce at the expense of poor and working people. Consequently, massive and extensive unemployment is making a bad situation worse for many, especially African Americans and Latinos who are experiencing further declines in employment rates, rising poverty rates, falling homeownership rates, and decreasing health

insurance and retirement coverage. Additionally, the overall number of people living in poverty has reached the largest number in the 51 years for which poverty estimates are available; and the income gap between the top 10 percent and the bottom 90 percent has reached a level higher than any other since 1917, which includes the “Great Depression “of the 1930s (Weller, Fields, & Agbede, 2011; Lieberman, 2010; Rampell, 2010; Saez, 2010; Sharp, 2009; U.S Census Bureau, 2010).

Despite the oscillations between bi-partisan love fests and venomous partisan attacks, both Republicans and Democrats are united as avowed agents of Wall Street, whose mission is to accelerate and complete the primary order of business of the past several decades. This mission prioritizes the eradication of all public spheres of influence, public sector services, and labor unions in order for the economic and cultural doctrine known as neoliberalism to reign supreme over all aspects of life.

The current neoliberal assault on the public sector is not a new trend and is in fact reflective of the ongoing attack against public education, teachers and their unions. Primary and secondary public education in the U.S. encompasses one of the largest publicly owned and operated institutions, and employs the largest unionized workforce in the country. As such, education policies over the past three decades have been designed to transform public education into a competitive profit generating enterprise, which serves as the primary instrument in producing the obedient dispositions that are required of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. This applies to both students, as future workers, as well as education workers.

### **Contextualizing the Struggle**

The United States has always failed to live up to its declared ideals. The enslavement of African people was encoded in the original Constitution, and remained institutionalized in various forms for more than a century; and genocidal attitudes, policies and practices towards Native Americans have persisted throughout U.S history. Racism and white supremacy was woven into the fabric of American society and persists to this day. Women have been excluded from political and economic power for most of U.S. history, while people who are disabled by dominant norms have persistently been deemed disposable. Over all, working class oppression and economic inequality has always been a major component of the

“American experience.” Oppression and exploitation on such a massive scale is a brazen betrayal of the espoused values associated with freedom and democracy within the American narrative. Because oppression and subjugation in the U.S. is entrenched both structurally and culturally, and social agency is nonexistent or restricted for so many people; free-market doctrine becomes all the more deceptive in its fundamental tenet that everyone has the same opportunities for success or failure based on individual merit (Miller, 1990).

These systems of oppression have continuously been embedded within education practices, policies and institutions in the United States. In the face of this, efforts by education reformers throughout U.S. history, working to ensure that education is universally available to every child irrespective of race, class, gender, ethnicity and ability made notable progress within the 20th century. Many liberal reformers, believing that democracy and capitalism are compatible, posit that universal access to social justice curriculum and student centered pedagogy can lead to equal opportunity for all within the existing political and economic order.

It is indisputable that social justice concepts are crucial in understanding and disrupting attitudes and beliefs that maintain white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, ableism, and other social identity based oppressions. However, many critical educators also recognize that this is not enough since capitalism by design demands human exploitation and degradation, therefore making universal liberation unachievable within a capitalist society (Hill, 2009). African American scholar Manning Marable, an ardent critic of capitalism, was well known for bridging identity-based liberation with structural solutions. Much of his life’s work documented how capitalism and U.S. political institutions are racist to the core and deliberately structured to maximize Black oppression. According to Marable, many Black liberation leaders understood this such as Malcom X, who before his death claimed, “All my life, I believed that the fundamental struggle was black versus white. Now I realize that it is the haves against the have-nots” (Black, 2009, : 3). Marable goes on to state:

Malcolm came to the realization, King came to the realization, that the nature of the struggle was between those who have and those who are dispossessed... we were attracted to Marx because it helped to illuminate and make clear the objective material circumstances of poverty, unemployment and exploitation in black people’s lives, which is why we became socialists or Marxists, because we

understood that there could not be a path toward black liberation that was not simultaneously one that challenged the hegemony of capital over labor (Black, 2009, : 3).

### **Neoliberalism, Citizenship and the State**

Education policy in the U.S. over the past thirty years is being driven by the doctrine of neoliberalism, which posits that free-market capitalism is a superior and common sense approach to organizing all aspects of society; and that market forces should replace the state as the primary producer of cultural reason and value. Its fundamental tenet of market freedom mandates that private enterprise must be free from obstacles associated with government and civil society because they interfere with market demands and the accumulation of private wealth. Its foremost goal is to privatize and deregulate all sectors of the economy, with private interests being prioritized over popular will. Within the neoliberal worldview, egalitarian methods of redistributing wealth are not to be tolerated. This requires restrictions on popular democracy, and the eradication of public institutions, social safety nets, progressive taxation, price controls, affordable housing, workers rights, environmental protections, consumer protections and public health laws. It also requires the elimination of government control (taxation, workers rights, environmental protections) over national borders where goods and capital are concerned, otherwise known as free trade. Public education is at the top of the neoliberal hit list.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, neoliberal doctrine is rapidly entrenching itself within all aspects of American society and culture, habitually spoken of with sacred reverence as if it is divinely inspired and the only rational way of organizing social relationships. Neoliberalism imposes market logic on citizenship, where people are defined as economic maximizers governed by self-interest, whose value is narrowly equated as being a self-sufficient worker and eager consumer. This consumer citizen is glorified, construed as willing, resourced and capable of making empowered market-led choices. Democracy thus becomes a function of consumer choices, and the individual is solely responsible for her or his own well-being, success or failure (Lynch, 2006).

While capitalist hegemony is not new to many industrialized societies, and has long been woven into the dominant cultural narrative in the United States, neoliberalism functions within a more aggressive and ordered web of political, social and cultural controls. Neoliberal hegemony prevails through the relentless imposition of market dogma, to the point where it becomes unquestionable, and deeply embedded in our

identities and fundamental understandings of the world. According to David Harvey, this “conceptual apparatus “has been constructed and” appeals almost ‘naturally’ to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities that seem to inhere in the social world we inhabit” (2006, p. 3)

Whereas neoliberalism tells us that human welfare is best advanced by the maximization of commercial freedoms within an institutional structure characterized by individual liberty, private property rights, free markets and free trade; in truth the state plays a crucial role in creating and preserving the institutional framework that allows neoliberalism to thrive (Harvey, 2006). David Harvey explains:

The state has to be concerned... with the quality and integrity of money... set up those military, defense, police and juridical functions required to secure private property rights and to support freely functioning markets.... [because] if markets do not exist (in areas such as education, health care, social security or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action... (2006, p. 2).

Effectively, the neoliberal world order is dependent upon government functioning as an aggressive agent in defending profit over people, and is duty-bound to intervene domestically and internationally to preserve and expand the interests of capitalism. Under this arrangement the state acts as a major funding source for private profit. Often referred to as corporate welfare, this is a process where public funds are diverted away from public investments, and instead government finances (subsidizes) private profit through bailouts, tax loopholes, debt revocations, loan guarantees, private development, hiring of contractors, and public-private-partnerships (Lipman & Hursh, 2007; Nader, 2000).

Neoliberal governments also institute corporate management models into public sector institutions, while giving their leaders corporate titles such as Chief Executive Officer (CEO). This emulating of private sector business by public sector institutions contributes to increased antagonism towards public sector unions.

Ultimately, the free-market is a myth within neoliberal capitalism; instead the neoliberal state imposes market discipline and austerity measures on the poor and working-class, while ensuring that socialism flourishes for the ruling class.

### **Public Education: Investing in the Enterprise**

Neoliberal forces have had a major influence over the direction of U.S. education policy over the past several decades. During this time corporations and policy makers have worked forcefully to incorporate the market into public education, with Fortune magazine confidently observing in 1998, “many analysts believe that education, broadly defined, will emerge as one of the leading investment sectors over the next 20 years” (Justin, 1998, p.198; Means, 2008).

In 1983 the Reagan administration, riding the tide of the conservative back to basics movement, published a report titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform*. In its opening pages, it declared, “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p.3). *A Nation at Risk* was reflective of a previous claim made by Reagan’s Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell, that the country’s public education system was failing to meet the national need for a globally competitive workforce (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Inflaming a sense of crisis over public education not living up to its intended function of training a servile workforce has provided the primary rationale for what has commonly become known simply as “education reform.”

National Governors Association education summits are convened on an annual basis and have been instrumental in creating political momentum and public support for the implementation of neoliberal strategies in U.S. public schools. National Education Summits are consistently co-sponsored by organizations that represent for-profit interests, such as the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Summits are also attended by corporate leaders who occupy most of the issues panels and serve as celebrated speakers.

The 1989 National Education Summit was led by then Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton. At this summit, the groundwork was laid for the Bush (senior) Administrations authored legislation called *America 2000: Excellence in Education Act* which centered on school choice, national testing, and a program creating new kinds of schools (i.e. charter schools) and was intended to achieve fundamental education reform by “reinventing the nation’s school system” (Scott, 1993,

p. 1). Supporters of the bill maintained that it would use principles of free market economics by introducing the element of school choice, and promoting student, teacher, and school improvement through systems of reward for excellence. Congress did not pass this legislative program. The core elements of *America 2000* was soon realized with the passing of its next incarnation called *GOALS 2000: Educate America Act*, which was signed into law on March 31, 1994 by President Bill Clinton. This act is considered to be a predecessor to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

During the 1996 National Governors Association Education Summit, 44 governors, mostly Republican, and 50 corporate CEOs attended and set the priorities for education reform efforts for the next century (Achieve, 1998). While reporting on the summit for CNN, Charles Bierbauer observed that, “No students and only one or two teachers have been invited. Groups left out, such as the National School Boards Association and the National Parent Teacher Association, have openly complained” (Bierbauer, 1996, p.1). The summit was co-convened by Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson, who announced during the summit “we need to say to those individual students if we raise the bar higher... you can learn more and do better... and you will be able to compete more favorably internationally than we have in the past” (Brackett, 1996, : 2). Thompson created the nation's first parental school choice program in 1990, allowing low-income Milwaukee families to send children to the private or public school of their choice. School choice essentially introduced the market-oriented notion that schools should compete against one another for customers (students) and revenue (public funds).

While some professional education associations have played a role in developing curriculum standards associated with market-based reforms, other groups often referred to as “independent,” “bipartisan,” and “not-for-profit” were in fact representing the interests of big business and politicians who championed the neoliberal education movement of the 1990s (Mathison & Ross, 2004). According to Mathison & Ross:

The private and politically conservative company Achieve, Inc was created at the 1996 National Education Summit... the Board of Directors is composed of six governors (three Democrats and three Republicans) and six CEOs. Many of the initiatives that sustain and drive the standards-based reform movement are driven



by a small number of such groups... [who] seized the opportunity for profit making around standards and testing in schools... [and] the newly created and acquired for-profit divisions of the Educational Testing Service, are realizing huge profits as a consequence of the standards-based reform movement (2004, p. 11).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed into law on January 8, 2002. The act reauthorized and amended federal education programs established under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. In line with common neoliberal rhetoric, designers and proponents of NCLB claim that it continues the focus the ESEA had on educational equity and preserve its role as an important civil rights law by requiring the academic achievement of all students to be measured and to improve over time (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). NCLB was developed and passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, co-authored by Senator Edward Kennedy, and with Congress basing its legislation on a “blueprint” proposed by President Bush. The law primarily affects schools receiving Title I funding, which are supplemental government funds granted to school districts with high concentrations of students at the poverty level and most at-risk for low academic achievement. Determined by the proportion of students enrolled from low-income families, over 90 percent of all elementary and secondary schools around the country receive Title I funding (Villavicencio, 2005).

According to Pauline Lipman, the focus of NCLB is compulsory testing and a system of sanctions tied to the tests. The law requires states to test all students in the subject areas of reading, math and science. Lipman(2007) goes on to report:

Scores must be disaggregated by subcategories that include race, special education, and English-language learners. By 2014, all students in all subcategories are to be proficient in all subjects tested. Schools in which any subgroup does not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward this goal are subject to a set of progressively more stringent sanctions including permitting students to transfer to another school, corrective action and provision of supplemental education services, reconstitution (including replacement of school staff), and restructuring (including state take-over, reconstitution as a charter school, or private management) (p. 37).

The NCLB mandate that all limited English-language learners achieve English fluency in three years runs counter to most bilingual education programs that promote proficiency in a student's native language as well as English, because it sanctions schools whose English-language learners do not pass mandated tests in English. NCLB also requires schools to provide military recruiters access to students within schools as well as providing them students' names, addresses, and telephone listings. It also authorizes "constitutionally protected" school prayer, and allows the gay and lesbian exclusionary Boy Scouts of America to utilize school facilities (Lipman, 2007). Lipman goes on to report, "NCLB brings under one umbrella social conservatives, proponents of the market, and business interests concerned with preparation of a literate and disciplined workforce through education standards and measurement" (2007, p. 38).

In 2007, five years after the passing of NCLB, the Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committee in Massachusetts officially endorsed a statement that in part reads:

The face of American schooling is changing in ways that we do not believe the public realizes or endorses. The pressure of high stakes testing catalyzed by NCLB is compelling schools to focus on a narrow curriculum, depriving students of the rich learning that comes from the study of art, music, history, science, foreign language, and physical education – all currently being pushed to the periphery or eliminated completely. It is unacceptable that a liberal arts curriculum is gutted in the name of closing the achievement gap, and it is not in the best interests of any students, their families or the nation to continue on this path (Amherst Regional Public Schools, 2007).

During the 2005 National Governors Association summit, Art Ryan, CEO of Prudential Financial (also Achieve, Inc.'s co-chair), declared while speaking of the limited gains public schools are making in raising high school graduation rates, "Business leaders in every state have a responsibility to get involved with public schools" (National Governors Association, 2005,:9). This summit ended with attendees setting an agenda called "Action Agenda for Improving America's High Schools" which calls on state leaders to "Redesign the American High School... it is not enough to raise requirements. The average high school must be made more flexible... states must provide additional academic supports for low-performing students and expand the

range of high quality high school options for students by financing new types of high schools” (National Governors Association, 2005, : 12).

At the 2008 National Education Summit, in addition to hearing a speech where U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings (a Bush appointee) publicly berated parents, teachers and principals who are critical of NCLB, while invoking the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. as an inspiration for NCLB. Attendees also had a chance to attend a session titled “Investing in the Enterprise: Could Public Education Make the Grade as a Capital Venture” (Aspen Institute, 2008, p.1).

Since the passage of NCLB, neoliberal education has grown to encompass an extensive range of market-oriented schemes. According to David Hursh and Camille Anne Martina, “NCLB along with charter schools and voucher systems introduces markets into education, therefore introducing a market system in public education” (2003,: 3). School choice(voucher systems) forces schools to compete against each other for customers, leading to the further destruction of neighborhood public schools; standardized testing regimes serve as a surveillance apparatus to control students, teachers and schools; and charter schools are private enterprises that are being positioned to replace public schools. Through the utilization of public-private-partnerships, all serve as a means to subsidize private profits with public funds, while using the rhetoric of social justice as a subterfuge.

Major for-profit corporations such as Harcourt, Houghton Mifflin, Kaplan, McGraw-Hill, and Princeton Review serve as the primary vendors of standardized test development and preparation. Key suppliers in this market segment encompass test content and exam providers, standards alignment providers, and psychometric evaluators and providers of test delivery products (Burch, 2009).

As with test development and preparation, NCLB ushered in highly profitable new market segments in data analysis and management whereby corporate vendors design the systems through which districts identify underperforming students, and offer products and services that analyze raw test scores and develop computer-based information systems. Most leading suppliers in this segment also offer data-interpretation services in which school districts lease software to design assessments, administer them

online, score them electronically, report results, and analyze and disaggregate test scores. Software used for these products often contain preloaded curriculum for teachers (Burch, 2009).

Major corporate vendors including Club Z, Education Solutions, Educate Online, Huntington, Kumon, Kaplan, Princeton, Sylvan, and Brainfuse, supply curriculum and tutors for the NCLB mandated remedial tutoring services (supplemental education services). This has provided opportunities for vendors in this market segment to assume the primary responsibility for the education of students who perform poorly on standardized tests (Burch, 2009).

The Online Content business is also booming through digitalized curriculum, hardware on which curriculum is loaded, internet-based technical support aligned to the curriculum, as well as instructional materials used with online curriculum such as math blocks and storybooks. School districts rarely buy traditional books now, instead they are buying and leasing software in core content areas to be downloaded and printed. Many of these same companies also supply a significant portion of teacher development trainings (Burch, 2009).

With the proliferation of for-profit companies making billions of dollars in profits from key mandates of NCLB, it is important to recognize how these profits are being generated from the failure of low-income students to meet performance standards. Many of these same corporations also have significant influence in the development of such standards. It is highly unlikely that the executives and shareholders of these corporations, who are profiting from the reproduction of oppressive social orders, are compelled to make sure that education becomes an engine for equality.

All and all, the narrowly scripted curriculum and high-stakes testing regimens required by NCLB serve as important instruments in the construction and maintenance of neoliberal hegemony. These methods emphasize a student's ability to choose the right answers on tests that by design circumvent critical inquiry, since meaning and understanding are substituted with pedagogical approaches that are only concerned with the robotic and uncritical acceptance of correct answers and dominant norms (Leyva, 2009). By design these systems are fulfilling their intended purpose of shaping the disposition and worldview of students to function as neoliberal subjects.

Up until the mid-nineties public schools and districts mostly contracted with private companies to provide food services, transportation, and drivers education programs, and have since extended into providing administrative, clerical support, and building maintenance services. More recently public schools have moved towards outsourcing teachers and other instructional staff, which involves contracting with private companies, including the utilization of corporate “temp agencies” like Kelly Services, Inc. (a Fortune 500 company). In line with the universal neoliberal directive of seeking out cheap, non-union labor, the outsourcing of teachers also involves the recruitment of teachers from overseas by multinational corporations such as Arrowhead Manpower Resources, Inc. located in the Philippines (Arrowhead Manpower Resources, n.d.; Burch, 2009; Stancliff, 2008; Wirt, 2010).

### **Managing the Enterprise**

The transfer of government funds and oversight to private enterprise is at the heart of neoliberal economic restructuring, and requires the suppression of democratic concepts and practices. Within education this involves reducing or eliminating mechanisms for public oversight of schools and pushing out teachers unions. A major trend in this direction includes what is referred to as “mayoral control” of school districts, which as Danny Weil notes:

...is part and parcel of an educational movement that we are increasingly witnessing... a movement towards centralizing decision-making regarding public schools in the hands of an elite autocracy... Under this governance structure, a small group of policy makers are... tasked with the job of legitimizing corporate and financial actors to make crucial decisions about public education without the messy problem of public accountability, public transparency nor public input.

This represents a neoliberal turn that goes beyond issues regarding the private operation of individual charter schools and instead twists and turns its way right into the heart of privatizing the public urban sphere in entirety, while making the government simply a boardroom or ‘secret parliament’ for powerful corporate interests (2009, :27).

Under mayoral control, school chancellors with very little to no background within public education, but have corporate management experience as “Captains of Industry” are being appointed by city mayors to run public school districts like dictatorial CEO’s. New York City serves as a prime example of this trend under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who in 2002 appointed Joel Klein as chancellor of the New York City’s public school system. Klein came to this position fresh from serving as chairman and chief

executive officer of the multinational media corporation Bertelsmann Inc., the U.S. subsidiary of the German giant Bertelsmann AG. It is noteworthy to add that Bertelsmann A.G. admitted to having a Nazi past, making huge publishing profits during Hitler's Germany by using Jewish slave labor (BBC News, 2002).

In 2010, Klein resigned as chancellor to become an executive vice president with Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, the parent company of Fox News. In his new corporate role, Klein is charged with pursuing business opportunities in the education marketplace for News Corporation as part of its first venture into the for-profit world of education. This comes on the heels of News Corporation buying 90 percent of Wireless Generation, a company that develops software to track student progress and customizes individual lesson plans. This purchase promises to thrust one of the world's biggest media corporations behind a concept championed by Chancellor Klein where New York City schools partnered with Wireless Generation in a program called School of One (Santos, 2010).

According to award winning New York Daily News reporter Juan Gonzalez, Klein's legacy as chancellor is a Tale of Two Cities:

To Manhattan's wealthy elite, the city's longest-serving chancellor was 'one of the most important transformational ... education leaders of our time' (according to Bloomberg)... [Klein] brought in scores of innovative charter schools and brought corporate management methods to a 'dysfunctional' system. But most New Yorkers simply do not agree that he succeeded... [only] 30% of city residents believe our public schools have improved under Klein and Bloomberg (2010, pp.12-19).

In November 2010, Mayor Bloomberg unexpectedly announced that he was replacing Klein with Cathleen Black as the New York City schools chancellor, by way of a unilateral decision making process that was notoriously shrouded in secrecy. As this announcement was being made, Ms. Black, who has no experience working in the field of education and attended only elite private schools, was making a multimillion-dollar fortune as the sitting chairwoman of Hearst Magazines and as a board member for both Coca-Cola and I.B.M (Otterman & Barbaro, 2010). The New York Times reported that Mayor Bloomberg defended his decision by arguing that under a 2002 law that gives him control of the city schools, he can appoint whomever he pleases and the law requiring chancellors to hold education

credentials should be eliminated because the city needs a school chancellor with broader skills (Hernandez & Otterman, 2010).

A poll conducted and released by Quinnipiac University on November 23, 2010 reported that fifty-one percent of New Yorkers do not believe that Cathie Black has the qualifications to be chancellor, while twenty-six percent feels that she does. Bloomberg argued that, “Ms. Black was a superstar manager whose expertise in cost-cutting would be a boon to a school system facing significant cutbacks... her experience dealing with customers would help mend relations with alienated teachers and parents” (Hernandez & Otterman, 2010, p. A20).

### **“There's Big Money to be Made Educating Poor Kids”**

Over the past thirty years, neoliberal schemes have systematically under resourced and vilified primary and secondary public education with the intent of providing the rationale for privatized solutions, and both non-profit and for-profit charter schools serve as a means to this end.

Charter schools are publicly funded yet privately owned or operated educational enterprises, and are actively marketed as the only logical alternative to everything that ails public education.

Some charter schools are stand-alone organizations, are more or less “grassroots” in nature, and offer specialized curriculum to fill a specific community niche. These charters are usually non-profit, and mostly boutique in nature, meaning they are intended to serve privileged communities that require selective enrollment processes. Boutique charters are guided by the belief that public schools are not able to serve the elite strivings parents from privileged communities have for their children, and exposing their “special” children to “the other” children who are outside their social class is somehow dangerous (Goodman & Gonzalez, 2010).

Charter schools within low-income communities are normally for-profit, strictly serve business interests and have enrollment systems that are mostly based on lotteries. These schools often take the form of what are known as Education Management Organizations (EMOs), which are for-profit organizations that are contracted by public school districts to manage and operate individual public and charter schools or clusters of schools. EMOs often manage networks of

charter schools that are referred to as charter management organizations (CMOs) (Burch, 2009; Molnar et al., 2009).

In line with the rhetoric behind NCLB, most charter schools are promoted using a social justice discourse of fulfilling the promise of Martin Luther King, Jr and other progressive leaders by way of closing "the achievement gap" as a means of ending social inequality. To do this, charter schools are marketed as an alternative to public schools because they offer a highly disciplined, competitive and structured environments - free from the interference of teachers unions - as a means to improve the performance outcomes on standardized tests for "underachieving" low-income students. It is promised that only under such conditions can students hope to have better lives through obtaining the vocational aptitudes needed by future employers.

The primary method in which charter schools, regardless of their size and nature, function as an instrument to undermine public education is by draining public resources from community-based public schools. Because charter schools are attached to "choice" schemes, parents are not only allowed, but also aggressively encouraged to send their children to charter schools. The money that is normally allocated to a public school system is then transferred along with students to the privately owned or operated charter schools. This results in massive sums of public monies being siphoned from dwindling public school budgets into the burgeoning private enterprises known as charter schools.

According to Michael Hussin, a former chair of the Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committee in Massachusetts, financial records show that charter schools in western Massachusetts are building up large cash reserves, even as public schools are forced to cut programs and lay off teachers. Hussin claims that in the 2009-2010 fiscal year, Amherst regional students each represented \$13,642 in public school funding. Due to charter school legislation, if a student chose to attend a charter school, then the money to be allocated to the public school system was transferred to the charter school instead. Approximately \$914,057 (\$855,568 for tuition and \$58,489 for "facilities aid") was taken out of the Amherst regional schools in that year when 67 students chose to attend charter schools. The argument that fewer students might mean less of a burden on the public school budget doesn't hold true, as by and large the public



school is still paying the same bills they would otherwise - the same utility bills, equipment bills, and paying the same numbers of staff and administrators (Scott & Gubrium, 2010).

The Community Renewal Tax Relief Act of 2000 established the New Markets Tax Credit, which made private investment in charter school all the more lucrative. On May 7, 2010 Juan Gonzalez reported in the New York Daily News:

Wealthy investors and major banks have been making windfall profits by using a little-known federal tax break to finance new charter-school construction. Under the New Markets program, a bank or private equity firm that lends money to a nonprofit to build a charter school can receive a 39% federal tax credit over seven years. [T]he New Markets Tax Credit, is so lucrative... wealthy investors and banks can double their money simply by building charter schools... in seven years (Gonzalez, 2010, p 1, 2 & 18).

As charter schools increasingly edge out neighborhood public schools across the country, charters in Harlem, New York have come to embody the neoliberal model to be replicated on a national level. A significant amount of Harlem charter schools board of directors seats are occupied by hedge fund directors and finance capitalists who are legally responsible for running the schools and determining their financial, educational and workforce policies (Miner, 2010). According to the New York Times, many hedge funders obsession “is creating charter schools, the tax-funded, independently run schools that they see as an entrepreneurial answer to the nation’s education woes... in New York, hedge funds are at the movement’s epicenter” (Hass, 2009, p5).

Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) is an example of one of the most celebrated neoliberal education reform efforts in the country. HCZ offers a range of social services to low-income families within 100 neighborhood blocks in Harlem, along with several charters schools. Its founder Geoffrey Canada has emerged as the preeminent powerhouse of the charter movement. Canada appears to be on top of his world, he is a close friend and ally of NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who recently named Canada the “most important living New Yorker” (Otterman & Barbero, 2010, p. A15). Canada is also an enthusiastic supporter of Bloomberg’s recent appointment of corporate chieftain Cathie Black as NYC schools chancellor, claiming that he is

“thrilled” with Black’s appointment because of her “extensive management experience” (Otterman & Barbero, 2010, p. A15). Adored by Wall Street and promoted by Oprah Winfrey, Canada was practically deified in the 2010 neoliberal education propaganda film *Waiting for Superman*. Canada has also been showered with praise from President Obama, who has declared plans to duplicate the HCZ model in twenty other cities.

According to HCZ’s 2008-2009 nonprofit tax report, it has net assets of \$194 million, 25 million surplus from its operations, \$15 million in savings and temporary investments, and an additional \$128 million invested in hedge funds (Miner, 2010; Perloth, 2010; Gonzalez, 2010).

Living up to neoliberalisms proclivity to treat human beings as disposable, in 2004 half of HCZ’s teachers were fired at the end of the year, and another third were dropped the subsequent year due to low student test scores. According to Forbes Magazine, “The data-driven approach resonates with Wall Street but remains controversial among education reformers... according to Canada: ‘I’m for firing lousy teachers.’ Fighting words to the National Education Association” (Perloth, 2010, : 9). Also in 2004, HCZ’s sixth grade class was “dismissed by the [HCZ] board en masse” after the student’s performance was deemed “too weak” (Otterman, 2010, : 21).

On September 16, 2010 Mayor Bloomberg, New York City Housing Authority Chairman John B. Rhea and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein put out a joint new release about Harlem Children’s Zone’s plan to build a new \$100-million home for their Promise Academy charter school on land that belongs to St. Nicholas Houses Project. St Nicholas Houses Project is a low-income public housing complex, which contains 1,525 apartments and 3,389 residents. New York City is contributing \$60 million towards the project, and Harlem Children's Zone is financing the remaining \$40 million, which includes a \$20 million “gift” from Goldman Sachs (Miner, 2010; Gonzalez, 2010). According to Mayor Bloomberg:

...working with [Harlem Children’s Zone] to build its next state-of-the-art school and community facility within the New York City Housing Authority complex [St. Nicholas Houses in Harlem], we’ll expand that model of success, create needed jobs and revitalize one of our public housing communities. We’ve committed more than \$60 million to the project, but without private partners, it

could never happen. Thanks to Goldman Sachs' \$20 million contribution, it will (City of New York, 2010, p 1).

Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein went on to proclaim, "The Bloomberg Administration has made unprecedented investments in building schools across the City, and public-private partnerships are an important tool that let us get the best bang for our buck" (City of New York, 2010, p 3).

On September 3, 2010, the New York Daily News reported that several hundred residents from St. Nicholas Houses signed petitions asking the federal government to deny City Hall's plan to start construction on the Harlem Children's Zone Promise Academy (Gonzalez, 2010). The following December, Manhattan Community Board 10 (a local form of government with advisory authority representing Central Harlem residents) voted overwhelmingly to reject the project (Mays, 2010). During this period an opposition group formed calling itself Citizens for the Preservation of St. Nicholas Houses in Harlem, composed of residents of the housing complex. On their website they voice their collective concerns about the HCZ project relating to residents being displaced; losing community space including playgrounds, green space (grass, trees, gardens), benches and parking lots; a division of North and South housing parcels; and the building of the private charter school on public property for private interest (Citizens for the Preservation of St. Nicholas Houses in Harlem, n.d.).

Many charter school boards pay their school managers remarkably well, prompting the New York Daily News to remark in 2009, "There's big money to be made educating poor kids" (Koldner & Monahan, 2009, p 1). The article went on to disclose how three New York City charter school executives in 2008 made more than the School Chancellor, with annual salaries of \$400,000, \$316,570 and \$296,750, with four other charter officials making more than \$200,000 (Koldner & Monahan, 2009). These facts led Councilman John Liu of Queens New York to pronounce, "When salaries start mimicking executive compensation packages in the private sector, it starts to raise questions about both motivation and accountability" (Koldner & Monahan, 2009, p 4).

A more recent growth area within the charter school movement is the proliferation of virtual charter schools, which offers on-line education to primary and secondary school students without

the added expenses associated with brick and mortar structures and unionized teachers and support staff. Danny Weil goes on to explain:

The opportunity to make huge financial profits off of the growing emergence of virtual charter schools cannot be understated... companies and their investors shrewdly see tremendous financial gains in further disabling public education in favor of ‘choice’ and the virtual charter school is surely the latest vehicle for this political and economic convergence of forces demanding privatization. Caught in a tight embrace with political allies, for-profit companies (like K12, Inc. and many, many others) work assiduously with their political constituencies... to garner political, community and parental support for their business plans (Weil, 2010, p11).

K12 Inc. is a for-profit publicly traded technology-based education company that touts itself as the largest provider of proprietary curriculum and online education programs for primary and secondary students in the United States. It is also one of the fastest growing operators of virtual charter schools worldwide. William J. Bennett, a former Reagan Secretary of Education and Bush senior drug czar founded K12 Inc. in 1999 along with Michael Milken. Milken is also the founder and chairman of Knowledge Universe, a global education business with a network of close to 3,800 education locations, employing over 40,000 teachers and professional staff, and operating large online schools, colleges and school management systems serving five million students (Knowledge Universe, n.d.). K12 Inc. states on its website that its mission is to “strive to develop each child’s full potential... delivering a world-class education to every child by empowering families, teachers and school administrators with excellent education programs... regardless of geographic, financial, or demographic circumstance” (K12 Inc., n.d.; Business Wire, 2010). It is conceivable that K12 Inc.’s shareholders would agree that the company’s actual mission is to maximize their personal profits.

K12 Inc. founder William Bennett has a growing history of unethical behavior, with one of his most outrageous moments occurring in 2005 when Bennett hosted a conservative radio talk show. During his show while addressing a question to an on-air caller, Bennett responded to the caller by stating, “if you wanted to reduce crime, you could -- if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down” (Media

Matters for America, 2005). Michael Milken is infamous for using “junk bonds” to finance corporate mergers and acquisitions during the 1980s, resulting in him pleading guilty to six felonies relating to allegations of racketeering and securities fraud. He served two years in prison for these crimes in the early 1990s (Bracey, 2004).

On November 9, 2010, K12 Inc. announced results for the first quarter of fiscal year 2011 with the company generating revenue of \$134.9 million, representing a 26.8 percent increase over the preceding year and marking the twenty-fifth consecutive quarter of record revenue. (K12 Inc., 2010).

According to the New York Times, “This year, the San Mateo [K12 Inc.] virtual school... is expected to receive \$5,105 per student in state and federal money — \$375 more per student than what children in their authorizing school district... are expected to receive” (Pogash, 2010, :18). Columbia University teachers college professor and virtual charter school scholar Luis Huerta claims that on a national level virtual charter schools on average receive an equal amount of funding as traditional schools. Huerta points out that since there is minimal overhead and minimal accountability, “If virtual charter school costs are lower... then where is the money going? It doesn’t add up” (Pogash, 2010, :29-32).

### **Disrupting the Marketing Machine**

Contradicting the social justice claims of charter schools, including not-for-profit charters, a recent comprehensive study by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, found that “charter schools continue to stratify students by race, class, and possibly language, and are more racially isolated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the country” (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley & Wang, 2010, p. 4). In another recent study jointly conducted by the University of Colorado at Boulder and Arizona State University concluded that charter schools are very racially segregated when compared to neighboring public schools. Gary Miron, one of the study’s authors, goes on to report that he has observed the same pattern in most every study he has conducted about charter schools, and that charter schools facilitate the re-segregation of our society (Miron, Urschel, Mathis & Tornquist, 2010). As is the pattern in

American society, racial segregation translates into communities of color being subjected to economic austerity and hyper criminalization.

Additionally, a growing body of research shows that charter schools fail to enroll the same cross-section of children served by public schools and contrary to charter proponents claims, do not improve so called performance outcomes. In 2009 one of the most comprehensive studies out of Stanford University found that fewer than one-fifth of charter schools nationally offered a better education than comparable local public schools, almost half offered an equivalent education and more than a third, were considerably worse. The study's authors report that, "this study reveals in unmistakable terms that, in the aggregate, charter students are not faring as well" compared with students in traditional public schools (Gabriel, 2010, : 6).

Mounting evidence is disrupting the deceptive equity-based discourse behind the proliferation of charter schools, exposing the neoliberal agenda that is driving the privatization of public schools. To this end, charter schools provide an important function when public schools are purposely set up to fail as a result of accountability measures imposed by neoliberal governments. Within this scheme a predictable sequence of events unfolds. Sanctions are applied to schools for poor-performance on standardized tests; there is increased involvement of for-profit companies supplying test development and preparation, data analysis and management, mandated remedial services, and the utilization of proprietary online software. This forces students to experience a greater narrowing of curriculum; and teachers are expected to be technicians who teach to the test, while their pay and job security is dependent upon erratic test scores that do not capture the most meaningful aspects of teaching and learning. In these environments, the most vulnerable students are pushed out of school and are then subjected to a life of insecurity, criminalization, and a growing predatory for-profit prison industry. When these and other "reform" methods continue to miss the mark, public schools are then shut down and re-opened as privately managed charter schools, where remaining students will be properly trained to serve the needs of capital (Burch, 2009; Larsen, 2009, p. 43).

### **The Flexibility of Insecurity**

Marc Tucker, has been a long-time leader within the neoliberal education establishment, and has played a major role in education policy since the Reagan administration in terms of developing standards-based education as the primary tool for workforce development within the globalized economy. In 1988 Tucker established the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), composed of a consortium of private sector leaders and government appointees (of which Hillary Clinton was a former board member). In 1989 NCEE formed the first Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, which analyzed the impact of the globalizing economy on the requirements for education and job training in the United States. This resulted in a report titled, *America's Choice: high skills or low wages!*, which outlined NCEE's neoliberal agenda for education over the next 20 plus years (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2010).

In 2006 NCEE released another national report titled *Tough Choices or Tough Times: New Commission on Skills in the American Workforce*. The report contends that competitors within the global economy, particularly India and China, are out producing the U.S. with their more highly skilled and flexible workforce. It goes on to make a case that the U.S. is unable to maintain its world economic dominance because the U.S. educational system is failing to train American students, as future workers, with the vocational aptitudes that multinational corporations require of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. The report outlines the “Touch Choices” the U.S. workforce (otherwise known as the American public) must make to compete for jobs with the highly flexible, non-benefitted, low-wage workforces who are positioned as being their global rivals.

As with Reagan’s alarmist report *A Nation at Risk*; *Tough Choices or Tough Times* argues that the U.S. faces economic disaster unless our schools are radically restructured to become competitive private enterprises to enable them to fulfill their social engineering task of workforce development. *Tough Choices or Tough Times* (TCTT) argues “American industry... [is] in favor of high-performance management models designed to produce high-quality products and services with highly educated workers. Some school districts are moving in this direction. That movement needs to be accelerated, formalized, and brought to scale. We share here [ways] to make that work” (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2006, p. 15).

An important and operative term within neoliberal discourse is “flexible,” which is most commonly referenced in regards to the competitive workforce required of the modern globalized economy. It is also increasingly being utilized to reflect the workforce development goals of secondary and post-secondary education policy. For workers, flexibility means job (and in effect life) insecurity, and is most often experienced through at-will employment, temporary contract work, low-wages, and no guarantee of benefits or consistent hours of work. Translation: No unions!

A candid moment that illuminated this neoliberal mandate occurred in 1997 when Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan (a Reagan appointee) testified before the Senate Banking Committee and explained how the "sustainable economic expansion" is to a large extent due to "atypical restraint on compensation increases" and “appears to be mainly the consequence of greater worker insecurity" (Greenspan, 1997, p. 2). According to Cornell University professor Kate Bronfenbrenner (2000), “Greenspan’s fellow Federal Reserve Board member, Laurence H. Meyer, explains... corporate restructuring, globalization, and technological change have increased workers’ insecurity about their jobs. As a result, workers have been willing to accept... restraint on their real wages in order to increase their prospects of remaining employed” (p. 3). Research is showing that workers in a neoliberal economy are “three times more insecure about losing their jobs... [during] economic boom than in the depths of... recession... [and] is in large part a function of rapid increases in the extent and frequency of capital mobility and the corporate restructuring and employment upheaval that follows in its wake” (Bronfenbrenner, 2000, p. 4).

The triumph of neoliberal hegemony over the past three decades has emboldened its agents to increasingly be transparent about their intent for education to primarily serve the needs and demands of unfettered capitalism. Purveyors of this design remain less willing to expose its ultimate purpose of creating a disposable pool of global labor, forced to compete against one another to survive. The often-used term “race to the bottom” captures this reality best.

### **Yes We Can Win The Future Change We Can Believe In**

Regardless of what many had hoped President Barack Obama would be, he has always been very clear about his neoliberal intentions. During a 2008 interview, presidential candidate Obama talked about his admiration for President Reagan because of how he “changed the trajectory of



America” by making government smaller and more business friendly (Stein, 2008, : 4). During an interview with Fox News in 2008, candidate Obama again expressed these views by claiming:

I think there are a whole host of areas where Republicans in some cases may have a better idea... on issues of regulation... if you simply set some guidelines, some rules and incentives for businesses, let them figure out how they're going to for example reduce pollution.... [rather] than dictating every single rule that a company has to abide by (Fox News Network, 2008).

In his interview with Fox News, Obama went on to say, “I think that on issues of education, I have been very clear about the fact, and sometimes I have gotten in trouble with the teachers union on this, that we should be experimenting with charter schools. We should be experimenting with different ways of compensating teachers...[with] merit pay (Fox News Network, 2008).

During his presidential campaign, Obama's major donations came from top banking and corporate executives from Goldman Sachs, Citigroup, Microsoft, General Electric, JP Morgan Chase, IBM, Google, UBS, Time Warner, and Morgan Stanley (Center for Responsive Politics, 2009). Compared to his campaign rivals, Obama was the recipient of more money from executives who worked for pharmaceutical and health product companies. During his time in the Senate and during his presidential bid, Obama become the top recipient of money from oil giant BP when contrasted with all other political candidates over the past 20 years (Lovely, 2010; Dilanian, 2008).

As president, Obama appointed a team of economic advisors from the Clinton administration who played major roles in dismantling government regulations of banks, brokerages and insurance companies, freeing them to trade in unregulated and little-understood derivatives worth trillions of dollars (Calmes, 2008).

Late 2010 and early 2011 was a busy time for president Obama, who seemed determined to demonstrate his neoliberal credentials. In December 2010 he signed a free-trade agreement with South Korea; extended Bush era tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans; held a summit with

twenty top corporate CEO's, pledging to have a closer partnership with private industry and to review government regulations of industry (Cooper, 2011).

In January 2011 Obama named JP Morgan Chase Vice President and former U.S. Chamber of Commerce secretary, William Daley, as his new Chief of Staff; he signed an executive order to begin the process of further eliminating government regulations of industry; and hosted a White House visit with Chinese President Hu Jintao and fourteen corporate executives for the purpose of strengthening ties between the two nations and major multinational corporations.

Obama continued his spree by naming General Electric chief executive Jeffrey Immelt to head his new economic advisory council to focus on U.S. job creation and competitiveness (Bacon, 2011). Obama ended the month of January with a State of the Union address, in which he showcased his new aggressive and competitive mantra "Win the Future" (Shapiro, 2011). In an interview following Obama's speech, journalist Chris Hedges commented on how themes of the speech were directed towards appeasing Wall Street. Countering themes in Obama's speech, Hedges proclaimed:

...government's not a corporation. Government is not about competition. Government is about addressing the necessities of citizens: health, education, housing, security, jobs, living wages, protection so that people have clean and safe water and food. It's not about business programs. And that... is the ideology of the right wing, to not only to make government serve corporations but essentially reduce government and cut citizens loose (National Public Radio, 2011).

In February, Obama went before the U.S Chamber of Commerce pledging to get rid of "outdated and unnecessary regulations" and eliminate the "burdensome corporate tax code" (Millbank, 2011, : 11). In his speech before the Chamber, Obama stated:

In addition to making government more affordable, we're also making it more... customer-friendly. We're trying to run the government a little bit more like you run your businesses... my administration will develop a proposal to merge, consolidate and reorganize the federal government in a way that best serves the goal of a more competitive America (Inskeep, 2011, : 4).

Into the spring of 2011, as legislative assaults against public employee union rights intensified across the U.S., Obama maintained his pledge to the Chamber by remaining noticeably neutral. His deafening silence signaled complicity.

President Obama's determination to expedite neoliberal economic restructuring is impressive, and would make his guru Ronald Reagan proud. Because of this, Obama has alienated many of his original and most ardent supporters, including Princeton professor Cornell West, who has been very blunt about his assessment of the president. In a 2009 interview, West stated, "So far, he's only been a... black neoliberal (Goodman, 2009). In a 2010 interview West claimed, "the Obama administration seems to have very little concern about poor people and their social misery. Look at the policies vis-à-vis Wall Street downplaying Main Street" (Goodman, 2010).

### **Winners and Losers**

Beginning in 2009, the Obama administration initiated the Race to the Top (RTTT) funding competition, which uses billions of dollars in federal stimulus money to bribe states to compete against each other for education funds. In order to qualify and receive RTTT funds, states must adopt neoliberal education policies, which include opening up more charter schools and tying teacher pay and job security to student test performance. The states that implement the most rigorous market-based legislation win the competition, and since public school systems are systematically being starved of resources, to many state leaders and citizens, a chance to receive massive federal funds is an offer that cannot be refused. In the end, Race to the Top is nothing less than a domestic structural adjustment program. Danny Weil goes on to explain:

What the Obama administration is doing... is part and parcel of typical neoliberal policy making: wielding federal stimulus funds as a financial weapon to force all states to increase the amount of charter schools they host as well as force those states that do not have them to pass legislation authorizing them (2009, : 13).

In the first round of the RTTT competition, forty states along with the District of Columbia competed for hundreds of millions in federal funds, with two states, Delaware and Tennessee, being declared the winners in March 2010. Delaware received \$100 million and Tennessee received \$500 million to implement their market-based initiatives over the next four years

(Paulson, 2010). In the second round of the competition, thirty-five states and the District of Columbia applied for 3.4 billion in federal funds. Nine states were declared winners, “all of them emphasized ‘bold approaches’ to evaluating teachers and reforming low-performance schools” (Devore, 2010, :7). High stakes competition resulting in winners and losers are important concepts associated with RTTT as well as all things neoliberal. The private sector education industries are the victors in this competition, while the losers are low-income communities, education workers, and the common good.

The major recommendations called for within *Tough Choices or Tough Times*(TCTT)are at the forefront of the 2010 Massachusetts education reform act. This legislation outlines rigorous testing regimes that will serve the purpose of preparing students to obtain the highly competitive jobs needed to keep Massachusetts businesses competitive. It also outlines processes to replace public schools with what TCTT refers to as "contract schools" or "performance schools" which are essentially in-district charter schools. The Massachusetts bill named such schools “Innovation Schools” and “Readiness Schools.” These publicly funded yet privately managed schools remove nearly all the powers of locally elected school committees, while also outlining mechanisms to weaken, and in some instances eliminate teachers unions. This plan expedites the process for private organizations to operate existing public schools or to create new schools within school districts, and to be “freed from many constraints imposed by unions, school districts, and the state” (deLuzuriaga & Viser, 2008, :2). Not coincidentally, the TCTT influenced Massachusetts legislation was developed specifically for the purpose of the Massachusetts application for Race to the Top funds (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2008).

As with NCLB and Race to the Top, the recent Massachusetts legislation shows how democratic governors and legislatures, in states considered to be the most liberal in the country, are willing to aggressively participate in the neoliberal restructuring of public schools.

Merit pay (or performance pay) is a core feature of Obama’s RTTT competition, and forces teachers to compete against each other in order to receive pay increases or bonuses based on their ability to increase student test scores. Advocates of merit pay argue that fierce competition

between teachers, coupled with monetary incentives, will improve their effectiveness when teaching to the test. According to education historian Diane Ravich:

One of the signature issues of businesspeople and conservative Republicans for the past 30 years has been merit pay. They believe in competition, and they believe that financial rewards can be used to incentivize better performance, so it seems natural for them to conclude that merit pay or performance pay would incentivize teachers to produce better results... they assume that most people—in this case, teachers—are lazy and need a promise of dollars to be incentivized to get higher scores for their students... ideology trumps evidence (2010, :1,2 & 10).

Merit pay efforts serve as an essential tactic in undermining cooperative relationships, which conveniently destroys a necessary component of a strong and effective union – solidarity – a natural enemy of neoliberal hegemony.

Several recent and comprehensive studies on the effectiveness of merit pay conducted in public schools nationwide by Vanderbilt University, Columbia University, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Mathematica Policy Research and Economic Policy Institute; decisively concluded that teacher merit pay does not improve student achievement and standardized test scores (Springer, 2010; Goodman & Turner, 2010; Spring & Winters, 2009;McCabe, 2010).

According to the study by the Economic Policy Institute, student standardized test scores are not reliable markers of how effectual teachers are in the classroom, and the reliance on what is known as “value added” methods should not be part of high-stakes decisions about teacher evaluation and pay. Value-added measures use test scores to track the performance of individual students as they advance through the grades and see how much value a teacher has added. The authors of the study go on to advise policymakers and school officials to cease and desist from using test scores as a factor in holding teachers accountable (Baker, E., Barton, P., Darling-Hammond, I., Haertel, E., Ladd, H.F., ... Shepard, L.A., 2010).

The Obama administration is an aggressive advocate of the value-added method and through RTTT is coercing states to change laws so that teachers will be evaluated primarily by this method. The impact of this dehumanizing approach on students, teachers, and communities is

palpable. In September 2010, the Los Angeles Times published a value-added formula grading performance of more than 6,000 California teachers. Rigoberto Ruelas, a popular fifth grade teacher of low-income immigrant students in Los Angeles, committed suicide after the Los Angeles Times published that he was a "less effective teacher" based on his students' test scores. Despite the value-added rating of Ruelas, the L.A. Unified School District officially confirmed that Rigoberto Ruelas was a very effective teacher, while colleagues, students and parents report that he was a very committed teacher and a strong advocate for students. Many who knew Ruelas claim that he worked long hours, and would often go to students' homes to visit families, and was even known to bring groceries or other household items if there was a need (Hoag, 2010; Watt, : 4).

What happened to Rigoberto Ruelas illustrates the destructive nature of current education policy, where teachers, schools and students are reduced to being test scores and their value within the education marketplace is measured by testing achievements. Within this context people are dehumanized, human relationship are devalued, and lived experiences, social identities, hopes, aspirations, socioeconomic conditions, diverse ways of knowing and learning differences are systematically marginalized (Au, 2009).

### **Competition or Cooperation: The Way Forward**

Mounting evidence is exposing how merit pay incentives, charter schools, vocational curriculum, and high-stakes testing regimes do not fulfill their purported objectives, and instead are enormously detrimental to students, education workers, marginalized groups, social equality and ultimately the collective good.

While the wealthy continue to thrive and their children attend abundantly resourced private schools with robust curriculum, poor and working people are increasingly being subjected to forcefully controlled, profit generating vocational schools. Opposition to the transformation of public schools into competitive and profit-making enterprises is increasing amongst and between parents, youth, teachers, unions, and their allies. Only through mass and sustained collective action, both inside and outside of schools, can public education not only survive, but also live up

to its potential to become a pedestal for a society that provides equality of opportunity and equality of outcome (Hill & Cole, 2001).

The struggle over public education is imperative, and it is an essential part of a larger effort to disrupt and dismantle the political, economic and cultural forces responsible for neoliberalism's strangle hold on our lives and collective consciousness. We must concurrently understand and resist how these forces undermine and destroy all essential public goods, which are fundamental human rights, not commodities. Universal access to education, housing, child care, health care, pensions, transportation, water, food, media, emergency services, energy; along with equitable, safe working conditions and hate-free communities are all essential public goods that are reflective of a substantive democracy which legitimates a government that is charged with overseeing the egalitarian redistribution of wealth, income and power (Hill & Cole, 2001).

Universal public education (free, equally resourced and accessible for all) can play a pivotal role in bringing about radical change. This process requires schools and teachers – empowered by a militant labor movement – providing non-competitive educational environments that cultivate critical literacies, cooperative social relationships and egalitarian expectations. All are essential elements in building power when the ultimate goal is collective control of the economy.

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<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1012>.

**Writer's Details:** Timothy Scott is a doctoral student in Social Justice Education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is a former organizer with the International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW).

**Correspondence Details:**

tdscott@educ.umass.edu