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**AN ANALYSIS OF TWO EDUCATION REFORM POLICIES:  
OBAMA'S RACE TO THE TOP AND PROMISE NEIGHBORHOODS PROGRAMS**

**A Thesis**

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**By**

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## Introduction

Within six months of Barack Obama's inauguration, the Associated Press reported that the new administration was attempting to use \$5 billion dollars to turn around 5,000 failing schools around the country within 5 years, effectively "beefing up funding for the federal school turnaround program created by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law" (Quid, 2009). At the same time, it was noted that funding would be taken away from the Title I program (school funding for disadvantaged students) to help pay for school turnarounds, reducing Title 1 funding from \$22 billion in 2009 to under \$13 billion in 2010. Reportedly, these new policies, and more recent policies like Race to the Top, are part of an approach Secretary of Education Arne Duncan hopes to make permanent.

The influence of advocacy groups, educational foundations, and philanthropists on K-12 educational policy certainly plays a role in advancing educational reform agenda such as charters and turnarounds. However, policies like NCLB and Obama's Race to the Top program mark a broader shift from "social democratic to neoliberal policies that has been occurring over the past several decades, a shift accompanied by both discursive and structural changes in education and society" (Hursh & Martina, 2003, p.2). It is within this context that I examine two of Obama's signature education programs: Race to the Top (RttT) and the Promise Neighborhoods program (PN). These programs exemplify the transformation in the dominant ideology on education and society, as societal institutions – and society as a whole – are transformed from a democratic-based system to one based on the market.

In this analysis, I examine the relationship between neoliberalism and public education in order to provide context for the education policies laid out by the Obama administration, specifically focusing on Race to the Top and Promise Neighborhoods. I will discuss how market

discourse and shifts in the political climate have made way for a neoliberal education agenda based on privatization, strict and punitive assessments and accountability practices, and standardized high-stakes testing. A portion of this paper will analyze education policy documents and related literature to identify policy trends and give historical context to current national education policy reform agenda. This paper will also provide a critically reflective analysis of two current education policies – RttT and PNs – drawing on official documents and other literature to link these programs to a multi-faceted, multi-pronged, coordinated effort to dismantle public education in America. It is my contention that both the Race to the Top and the Promise Neighborhoods programs represent policies aligned with what Henry Giroux has called the “politics of disposability.” It is a politics where the market reigns at the expense of public discourse and democracy reflecting the rise of neoliberal policy in education and all facets of our lives (Giroux, 2008).

Neoliberals argue that increased globalization forces us to focus on increasing school efficiency through testing, accountability and choice. Furthermore, many neoliberals contend that accountability, choice, and standardized testing "will increase educational opportunity and ensure greater assessment objectivity than teachers provide" (Hursh, 2007, p.494).

However, it seems that reforms such as the Obama administration’s Race to the Top and Promise Neighborhood grant programs are unlikely to achieve these long-term goals because of issues involving funding, the efficacy and effectiveness of charter schools and turnaround efforts, the narrow focus on profits from the education industry, the debate about the role poverty plays in the schooling of low income students, and broad questions regarding the goals of public education, its role in a democratic society, and the path it is taking under neoliberal policies.

## Background

An ever-growing number of organizations and foundations are injecting large sums of money into education reform, specifically targeting school choice and the expansion of privatization efforts in urban, and more recently, suburban markets. The foundation for Obama's Race to the Top and the Promise Neighborhoods programs was laid by neoliberals and these groups long before Obama was elected. As early as 2007, Eli Broad and Bill Gates – two of the wealthiest men in America – announced that they would spend \$60 million to ensure that public education was on the agenda of the 2008 presidential candidates. “Ed in 08,” as their campaign was called, emphasized three issues: curriculum standards, teacher quality, and longer school days and years (Ravitch, 2010; Scott, 2009).

Programs such as Race to the Top, Promise Neighborhoods, Chicago's Renaissance 2010 (now New Schools for Chicago), the Renaissance Schools in Philadelphia, and Bush's No Child Left Behind, are indicative of the widespread change taking place across the country, the implications of which speak to larger trends and issues nationally. These initiatives are part of a larger shift in social policies as neoliberal social and economic policies have become prevalent over the past several decades (Harvey, 2005; Hursh, 2007; Lipman & Hursh, 2007; Saltman, 2000; Saltman, 2005; Saltman, 2007; Saltman, 2009; Saltman, 2010). In order to discuss the Obama administration's Race to the Top and Promise Neighborhood programs in this context, an understanding of the changing views about education is necessary.

Public education has been seen by many as a way to advance the public good, with educational policies to ensure its availability to all. However, it has also been a site of struggle and compromise, and current educational reform is presenting us with more struggles and compromises than ever before. Indeed, education worldwide is changing, becoming less a public

good and more the reflection of corporations, transnational corporations, international government organizations, and the like, that advocate, among other things, the privatization of our schools. In some circles, the current vision for education has been attributed to globalization.

According to David Held (2004), globalization is the “product of the emergence of a global economy, expansion of transnational linkages between economic units creating new forms of collective decision making, development of intergovernmental and quasi-supranational institutions, intensification of transnational communications, and the creation of new regional and military orders” (p.9). The globalization process “is seen as blurring national boundaries, shifting solidarities within and between nation-states, and deeply affecting the constitution of national and interest-group identities” (Burbules & Torres, 2000, p. 29). Kleniewski (2005) notes that “globalization of the economy has been used to justify economic and political decisions such as deregulation and privatization of industries, downsizing and streamlining of work forces, and dismemberment of the welfare services provided by government” (p.143). With respect to education, “it is the interplay between economic and political contexts of globalization that has driven most discussions of the need for educational reform” (Burbules & Torres, 2000, p.29). Globalization, “which should be viewed as a process doctrine rather than as an inevitable phenomenon, is driven, in part, by a political and economic philosophy known as neoliberalism” (Saltman & Gabbard, 2003, p.3).

A theory originating from economists Frederick Hayek and Milton Friedman (who is also credited with laying the framework for school voucher theory in the 1950s), neoliberalism suggests that markets can be trusted to resolve economic and social problems. The ideological foundation of neoliberalism is based on the belief that the unimpeded operation of capitalist free markets is the pathway to economic growth, individual freedom, and the reduction of inequality

(Harvey, 2005). Lipman (2011) elaborates, “neoliberalism is a set of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere, championing the privatization of social goods and withdrawal of government from provisions for social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient” (p.11). In this framework, the best form of government is that which governs least, leaving free reign to the market. In practice, the “neoliberal state enacts policies to deregulate markets and corporations, lower the taxes of business and wealthy individuals, loosen capital and labor controls by the state, allowance of foreign direct investments, replace support for social welfare with demands for personal responsibility (e.g. for retirement funds, education, healthcare), and privatize public institutions (such as prisons and schools)” (Lipman, 2011, p.13). It is connected with globalization, as well as monetary and fiscal austerity at the expense of public programs, and largely took hold during the Reagan/Thatcher era.

With neoliberalism, “the role of the social welfare and caregiving parts of the public sector should be minimized and the private sector should be allowed to do its magic” (Saltman, Edison Schools, p.184). As Saltman states in *Education as Enforcement* (2003), “the economic and political doctrine of neoliberalism insists upon the virtues of privatization and liberalization of trade and concomitantly places faith in the hard discipline of the market for the resolution of all social and individual problems” (p.3). Indeed, Apple (2005) states that the results of this strong influence on government by business “have been a partial dismantling of social democratic policies that largely benefited working people, people of color, and women...the building of a closer relationship between government and the capitalist economy, a radical

decline in the institutions and power of political democracy, and attempts to curtail liberties that had been gained in the past” (p.xxiv). In fact, according to Apple in the Rethinking Schools article, *Standards, Markets, and Creating School Failure* (2001), with neoliberalism “we are witnessing a major transformation of our understandings of democracy. Rather than democracy as a fundamentally political and educative concept, its very meaning is being transformed into primarily an economic concept. Thus, democracy itself is increasingly being defined as consumer choice, with the citizen seen as a possessive individual, someone who is defined by her or his position in market relations” (p.40).

Since the publication of “A Nation at Risk” more than twenty-five years ago, businesses have complained about public schools’ inability to train knowledgeable, efficient employees, blaming public schools for the loss of U.S. economic dominance, and alluding to the competitiveness of the market as the only solution for troubled schools (Lipman, 2004, p.2). Businesses are concerned with the development of a well-trained workforce to respond to *their* best interests and the market, and have criticized the schools for the lack of creativity and productivity, and for the loss of jobs to other countries. In essence, they have encouraged a link between assessments and our economy. This, in turn, has been followed by calls for privatization and for measures to improve the public school by adopting strict graduation requirements, a longer school year, new curricula, and more student testing.

Since that time, neoliberal ideals have increasingly dominated education policy. The current focus on choice, competition, markets, testing and accountability in education are based on neoliberal theory and practices. The Neoliberal education agenda “includes a drive towards privatization and decentralization of public forms of education, a movement towards educational standards, a strong emphasis on testing, and a focus on accountability” (Burbules & Torres, 2000,



p.1). Needless to say, with corporate management buzzwords like accountability, assessment, and privatization, one can see how this new reform movement is based on a public agenda driven by economics. With this, schools are suddenly thought to exist for the good of the national economy (the corporate controlled economy); and on an individual level, schools can now be justified for inclusion within this corporate-controlled economy (Saltman & Gabbard, 2003, p.6). This agenda-driven focus is evident in urban school districts across the country and, indeed, in other countries as well. This agenda has recently expanded, with the assistance of influential philanthropists (like Bill Gates and Eli Broad), to become part and parcel of federal government policies like Bush's NCLB, and more recently programs implemented by the Obama administration.

Hursh (2007) notes that neoliberalism was solidified "as the dominant approach to policy making in the United States" while George W. Bush was president (Hursh, 2007, p. 495). With the dismantling of the public sector during this time, the consequences for education were the same as for all public goods and services. David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as

a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate for such practices....Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, healthcare, social

security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. (p.2).

According to Tabb (2002) (qtd. in Hursh, 2007, p. 495), neoliberalism stresses

the privatization of the public provision of goods and services – moving their provision from the public sector to the private – along with deregulating how private producers can behave, giving greater scope to the single-minded pursuit of profit and showing significantly less regard for the need to limit social costs or for redistribution based on nonmarket criteria. The aim of neoliberalism is to put into question all collective structures capable of obstructing the logic of pure market (29).

Neoliberalism replaces the social democratic, aka Keynesian policies that held sway from the time of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the administration of Ronald Regan (Hursh, 2007; Lipman & Hursh, 2007). The decades after World War II saw growth as workers' wages rose, along with a period of stable economic growth. Many Americans saw their standards of living improve as the middle class expanded. However, corporate profits began to fall in the 1960s and early 1970s due to funding for the Vietnam War, rising oil prices, and the inability to pass on the cost of wage increases to consumers. This paved the way for the replacement of Keynesian policies with neoliberal policies that focused on the reduction of tax revenues and thus affects

social spending. Under the last Bush administration, federal government significantly increased military spending and reduced corporate and individual taxes, creating huge budget deficits that made way for cuts in social services (Hursh & Martina, 2003, p.5 ).

Neoliberal governments have attempted to get the public to go along with cuts in social services by shifting social responsibility from society as a whole to the individual, thus transforming the relationship between the individual and society. Margaret Thatcher summed this up perfectly when she stated “there is no such thing as society...There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first” (as qtd. in Hursh & Martina, 2003, p.626). With this, England’s Prime Minister shifts responsibility for success or failure entirely onto the individual and family, thus reducing everything to individualized relationships between providers and consumers, and understands inequality as a sign of personal or community deficit. For those who do not succeed, it is said they have made bad choices. By reducing success to individual merit, schooling becomes one more consumer choice where one benefits by choosing wisely. The country’s educational policies increasingly focus on developing markets in which schools can compete for students and families.

Although neoliberals call for reducing the size of government to a point where it can be dragged into a bathroom and drowned in the bathtub, Lipman and others maintain that neoliberalism actually involves the “intervention of the state on the side of capital, first to destroy existing institutional arrangements, and then to create a new infrastructure that facilitates capital accumulation through intensified exploitation of labor and privatization of social infrastructure and institutions” (Lipman, 2009, p.220; Harvey, 2005; Hackworth, 2007). Hackworth discusses a practice known as rollback neoliberalism which dismantles federal

funding for cities while transferring responsibility for social welfare to city governments. Responding to this, as well as market ideologies, city governments develop private-public partnerships, privatize public services, and look to tourism and real estate as key to growth (Hackworth, 2007).

Neoliberal policies have become so dominant that they seem to be inevitable and unquestionable, a type of common sense so to speak. Neoliberalism is now presented as if there is no alternative. As Bourdieu (1998) concluded, “Everywhere we hear is said, all day long- and this is what gives the dominant discourse its strength- that there is nothing to put forward in opposition to the neoliberal view, that it has presented itself as self-evident” (as qtd. in Hursh, 2007, p. 498).

Educational reforms touted by neoliberals are presented as necessary to enable all students to compete in our globalized world. Neoliberals believe that competition and choice lead to better schools, and in the long run, better education for everyone, closing the achievement gap between students of color and White students. However, by looking at *Race to the Top* and the Promise Neighborhood programs, I will show that this will not be the case. In fact, these programs are merely two additional rungs on a ladder leading us to school privatization. As Giroux notes in *Stealing Innocence* (2000), at more than \$600 billion per year “the for-profit education market is an expanding one, larger than either the military budget or social security” and... “central to this agenda is the attempt to transform public education from a public good, benefitting all students, to a private good designed to expand the profits of investors, educate students as consumers, and train young people for the low-paying jobs of the new marketplace” (p.85).

## **Race to the Top**

On February 17, 2009, President Barack Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). The law provided \$4.35 billion dollars for the Race to the Top (RttT) program. In the Race to the Top Program's Executive Summary, the program is described as "a national competitive grant program designed to encourage and reward States that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform; achieving significant improvement in student outcomes...; and implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas" (Race to the Top Program: Executive Summary, 2009, p.2). The plan revolves around four core areas: building data systems that measure student achievement; recruiting, developing, and rewarding effective teachers and principals using value-added models (VAM); adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace; and turning around the lowest-achieving schools. Criteria is based on these four components of the plan.

There are 19 "absolute" criteria listed under six general categories that must be met by every state or school district applying for RttT funding. The six general categories are as follows:

(1) State Success Factors; (2) Standards and Assessments; (3) Data Systems to Support Instruction; (4) Great Teachers and Leaders; (5) Turning around the Lowest-Achieving Schools; and (6) General Selection Criteria A 500-point scale based on the categories and criteria is used to evaluate and select each grant recipient, determining which states and proposals have complied with each of the mandated requirements (Race to the Top Program: Executive Summary, 2009, p.2).

As part of the requirements for Race to the Top, the plan outlines four school-model "interventions" for turning around schools. Proposals submitted for RttT funding must include plans to implement one of the four intervention models. These same school-model interventions are required in proposals for the Promise Neighborhoods grants. The four models are:

- (1) **Turnaround**, which replaces the principal, fires staff and rehiring no more than 50 percent. This model also includes financial incentives, professional development and resources, a new governance structure, collection and use of data, and other supports for students.
- (2) **Restart**, in which a local education agency converts a school or closes and reopens a school under a charter school operator or manager selected through a rigorous review process.
- (3) **School closure**, in which a local education agency closes a school and enrolls its students in higher-achieving schools. These should be within reasonable proximity to the school that has been closed and may include charter schools or new schools for which achievement data are not yet available.
- (4) **Transformation**, which focuses on developing and increasing teacher and school leader effectiveness and comprehensive instructional reform strategies. It also involves increasing learning time and creating community-oriented schools, and providing operational flexibility and sustained support.

Winners of the first competition, which allotted up to \$500,000 to each grantee, were: Washington DC, Florida, New York, Ohio, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Maryland, Massachusetts, Georgia, Hawaii, Delaware and Tennessee. Educational reforms were well under

way in each of the winning states, including participation on teacher evaluation systems, linking teachers' pay to test scores or tenure; and replacement of school staff and teachers in various schools and school districts in an effort to qualify for funding (Gabriel, 2010). For 2011, considerably less RttT funding (\$700 million dollars) will be split between the nine states (California, Colorado, Louisiana, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Illinois, New Jersey, South Carolina and Kentucky) that missed out on 2010, allotting \$200 million for these states, and \$500 million for a new early-childhood education competition. The nine-state funding component of RttT's latest grant competition has drawn some controversy because several of the 29 states with newly-elected governors took office after their states' initial RttT proposals were developed. Some of these governors are reluctant to take the funding offer because they feel it is tantamount to coercion by the federal government; others feel they need to have more input into the process and should be allowed to submit their own proposals for the grant money (McNeil, 2011).

"To win the future, our children need a strong start," said Secretary Arne Duncan. "The Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge encourages states to develop bold and comprehensive plans for raising the quality of early learning programs in America" ("Obama administration announces," 2011). However, to win a portion of the \$500 million dollars in Early Learning Challenge grants, states will have to "develop rating systems for their programs, and craft more standards and tests for young children" (McNeil, 2011).

The Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge, will allocate money to states that "create comprehensive plans to transform early learning systems with better coordination, clearer learning standards, and meaningful workforce development" ("Obama administration announces," 2011). This new competitive grant is open to all states, with monies available ranging from \$50 million to \$100 million, depending on a state's population. Among other

things, states applying for these early-learning grants will need to "design integrated and transparent systems that align their early care and education programs, create robust evaluation systems to document and share effective practices and successful programs," and provide training and support for the early childhood workers ("Obama administration announces," 2011). Specific competition guidelines developed by the U. S. Department of Education indicate that in order to win funding a state must:

- Develop and use early-learning and development standards for children, along with assessments;
- Develop and administer kindergarten-readiness tests, and develop rating systems for early-childhood programs;
- Demonstrate cooperation across multiple agencies that touch early-childhood issues, and establish statewide standards for what early-childhood educators should know;
- Establish a good track record on early learning, and an ambitious plan to improve these programs;
- Ensure early learning and prekindergarten data is incorporated into its longitudinal data system. (McNeil, July 1, 2011).

As with the original RttT program, outside judges will pick the winners of this competition; however, decisions ultimately will be made by Secretary Arne Duncan.

According to Klein (2011), the next round of RttT grants for 2012 has been proposed to channel funding to school districts, instead of states, seeking to encourage districts to do more with less in an era of budget tightening, rewarding changes that are thought to improve student outcomes while saving money (i.e. increasing class sizes and revamping teacher-tenure rules). The 2012 federal budget also calls for the establishment of the Presidential Teaching Fellows



program to replace TEACH grants. The Presidential Teaching Fellows would allow state grants to award scholarships of up to \$10,000 to students "who attend high-performing teacher preparation programs" (Klein, 2011). This signals the administration's attempts to change the way in which teachers are educated and trained, expanding non-university preparation programs, and paving the way for alternative programs like Teach for America.

During a speech in 2010, President Obama in referring to Race to the Top grants said, "In an effort to compete for this extra money, 32 states reformed their education laws before we even spent a dime." He went on to say that RttT reforms should not be controversial and that there should be a fuss if we weren't doing these things. However, the RttT initiative is not without its critics, and researchers have cited several problems inherent in the funding program. According to some education experts, with RttT, states are competing for federal money based on a choice and accountability agenda (Ravitch, 2010; Saltman, 2009). Critics charge that the Race to the Top program does not address things like children's' wellness and mental health, family issues, parental involvement, or afterschool programs. Others point out several problems with the grant program including: insufficient funding, questions about the motives of various groups, individuals and organizations involved in the program, and its exclusive focus on common standards and testing, the expansion of charters, teacher assessments and tying pay to performance (merit pay), and data systems (Hursh, 2007; Ravitch, 2010; Saltman, 2009). Issues of coercion have come to the fore as well.

One difficulty with RttT stems from the way in which the U.S. Department of Education encourages states to participate in the grant competition. On the surface participation in the program is seemingly voluntary; however, critics suggest otherwise, stating that "an examination of the incentives for participation suggests coercion" (Barnes, 2011). Notes Barnes (2011):

The Department of Education's blueprint to reauthorize No Child Left Behind suggests that \$14.5 billion Title 1 program, which provides federal funding to low-income school districts, could be tied to the adoption of the new national standards. The blueprint states that, "Beginning in 2015, funds will be available only to states that are implementing assessments based on college and career-ready standards that are common to a *significant number of states*." Thus, there is indication that if states choose not to participate in adoption of standards promoted by RttT now, they will still be forced to eventually adopt those standards or lose their Title 1 funding" (394).

Additionally, detailed in the Executive Summary for the Race to the Top program (2009), there are calls for the development and adoption of common standards and for participation in a consortium of states that is working toward jointly developing and adopting a common set of K-12 standards, and for the overall openness of states to reform, change and innovation (p.7).

Education is a multibillion-dollar industry that has grown over the last two decades. The involvement of major foundations and philanthropic organizations such as the Gates Foundation has been disconcerting for educators and the public who are skeptical of the motives of these seemingly altruistic groups (Saltman, 2010). In fact, according to Barkan (2011) and Saltman (2010), Obama and his Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, seem to advance the agenda of these groups. The framework for RttT aligns with the basic tenets of the Gates/Broad "Ed in 08" campaign, which emphasizes curriculum standards, teacher quality, data-driven assessments, and

longer school days and years, all of which are part of school reform agendas across the country (Scott, 2009). Indeed, it as *The Broad Foundations 2009/10 Report* describes:

The election of President Barack Obama and his appointment of Arne Duncan, former CEO of Chicago Public Schools, as the U.S. Secretary of Education, marked the pinnacle of hope for our work in education reform. In many ways, we feel the stars have finally aligned.

With an agenda that echoes our decade of investments - charter schools, performance pay for teachers, accountability, expanded learning time, and national standards - the Obama administration is poised to cultivate and bring to fruition the seeds we and other reformers have planted (as qtd. in Scott, 2009).

Duncan, for his part, has not failed to disappoint. He has partnered with private foundations, creating a position for a Director of Philanthropic Engagement, thus signaling to philanthropic organizations that the Department of Education is willing to work with them. With this, Duncan has placed a number of people from the Gates and Broad Foundations, as well as think tanks, advocacy groups, and other organizations that support this agenda. For instance, his chief of staff, Joanne Weiss, hails from the New Schools Venture Fund (funded by the Gates Foundation), and his Assistant Secretary, Russlynn Ali, has worked at Broad and the Education Trust, another organization funded by Gates (Barkan, 2011).

With school districts across the country strapped for cash, the RttT program is tantamount to dangling a carrot in front of school districts that desperately need the money. Many states, including Illinois, have passed educational reform legislation conforming to the four core tenets

of RttT the hopes of winning a portion of the grant money. Illinois has started work on a data system to track student progress over the course of their school years, and Governor Quinn has signed legislation tying teacher evaluations to improved student performance and making way for longer school days and years (Yednak & Fretland, 2010; Dillon, June 1, 2010). In states like Florida, Rhode Island and Delaware, education officials have been working on teacher-evaluation plans. In Florida, there are plans to pay for new charter schools to replace the state's persistently low-performing state (McNeil, March 30, 2011). In Georgia, \$19 million in RttT grant money is being used for a competition between charter schools and districts schools to develop new strategies to recruit the best teachers, build problem-solving skills, and develop STEM-focused charter schools. They would compete for awards of \$50,000, \$100,000, or \$350,000 (Cavanagh, 2011).

The New York Times reported that in 2009, a Gates-backed group, the New Teacher Project, "issued an influential report detailing how existing evaluation systems tended to give high ratings to nearly all teachers" (Dillon, May 2011). Secretary Duncan cited this report repeatedly and wrote rules into the RttT grant competition encouraging states to overhaul those systems. Then " a string of Gates-backed nonprofit groups worked to promote legislation across the country" ((Dillon, May 2011). Organizations and foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have provided several million dollars to states to assist them in restructuring these systems and obtaining RttT funding. For instance, the Gates Foundation doled out grant money to various states to help them shore up any problems they were having rolling out and implementing various components of RttT and to complete and submit applications for the RttT program (Dillon, May 2011).

It is no coincidence that RttT relies heavily on online technology for curriculum and classroom materials that Gates is moving to provide. An article in *Bloomberg Businessweek* reported that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in part "bankrolled the development of the common curriculum standards"; further observing that the U.S. Department of Education and the Gates Foundation "move in apparent lockstep" on this agenda (Golden, 2010). So much so that an announcement recently was made proclaiming the joint agreement between the Gates Foundation and the Pearson Foundation (a non-profit organization owned by the for-profit Pearson Company) to create online curriculum material for the new common core standards in math and English for grades K-12. According to the press release, the curricula will include materials, teacher preparation and development, and, of course, assessments. As Moore notes in *Cornering the Education Market (2011)*, "...it goes like this: Link the common core standards to winning 'Race to the Top' money, then link this to these quasi non-profits (which really aren't non-profit) testing companies who get to use federal money to fund the creation of standards' assessments and who had a seat(s) at the standards writing table, and you've got the creation of quite the little corner market. In advance of RttT's promotion of alternative teacher certification routes, Bill Gates also has partnered with two organizations, Educators for Excellence and Tech Plus to provide support for non-union, alternative paths to teaching, much like the highly-touted Teach for America (Dillon, May 2011). In addition, former Gates Foundation employees now work with U.S. Department of Education's Secretary, Arne Duncan; including Joanne Weiss, promoted from heading the RttT fund to Duncan's Chief of Staff. Weiss was formerly Chief Operating Officer of the New Schools Venture Fund, which finances charter school expansion provided in part by funding from the Gates Foundation.

Even Rupert Murdoch is poised to profit from RttT grant funds. *Education Week* reports that in New York, "competitively awarded federal funds have poured into several education technology ventures in recent months" (Quillen, 2011). Murdoch's company, Wireless Generation, which former New York schools chancellor Joel Klein is heading, has received \$5 million from the federal program Investing in Innovation (I3), and NYC's Innovation Zone Initiative, a project whose partners also include Murdoch's Wireless Generation, is using \$25 million of the state's \$696 million allotment from their RttT winnings (Quillen, 2011). All this, despite the fact that the National Academy of Sciences pointed out that there was no research to support this educational reform agenda, and "urged caution before the federal government essentially bribed cash-strapped states to enact its provisions "(Haimson, 2010).

Although more than 1.6 million students attend nearly 5,000 charter schools in 40 states and Washington, DC, there is little evidence that charter schools on the whole produce better results than traditional public schools. In fact, there is almost no evidence to support advocates' assertions that charters, and for that matter online learning, will be able to maintain quality while expanding as rapidly as the Obama Administration, Gates, and other charter school and online learning advocates are recommending. Most studies, such as the CREDO analysis (CREDO, 2009; Barkan, 2011), show charter schools on average fare no better than traditional public schools, even while many of them tend to exclude or "push out" struggling students. Tom Toch, co-founder of Education Sector, conducted a study of charter management organizations (CMO's). After two years of investigative analysis, Toch concluded that the "CMO's were unlikely to be able to maintain quality during rapid expansions" (Haimson, 2010). [It is also worth noting that Toch removed his name from the report after his analysis and findings were changed.]

To compete for funding from the RttT competition, states must embrace reforms that have not been fully researched or tested. RttT eligibility is, in part, contingent upon linking students' test scores to teacher evaluations. One problem lies in using scores to evaluate teachers through "value-added" models (VAM). A number of scholars have pointed out that these models have not been reliable and weaken protections for teachers. One RttT evaluator, Professor Helen F. Ladd, wrote, "Even the most sophisticated approaches typically cannot distinguish the contribution of teachers from the classroom context, and they generate estimates of a teacher's quality that jump around from one year to the next, largely because of the small sample sizes for individual teachers" (2009). These models depend on the existence of reliable tests, which may not truly exist.

Additionally, with high-stakes testing, there is the potential for further narrowing of the curriculum, to the exclusion of subjects such as art, history and physical education, rote learning and excessive test prep, and for testing scandals in the form of widespread cheating as currently experienced in states like Georgia, Pennsylvania, Washington DC, and New York. The standardized testing called for in the latest Race to the Top grants competition for early childhood learning is especially insidious in that it does not seem to take into account how young students learn. The Race to the Top criteria state that any assessments developed need to conform with the recommendations of the National Research Council's reports on early childhood (Race to the Top- Early Learning Challenge Executive Summary, July 2011). One such report, published in 2008, entitled *Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How*," makes clear how difficult it is to create good assessments for young children:

Assessments of any type must be selected and implemented with care, but special attention is needed when using direct assessments with young children. It

requires greater attention to establishing a relationship with the child, to ascertaining whether the task is familiar and comprehensible to him or her, to limiting length of the session and the child's discomfort, to recognizing the possibility of bias if the tester is a caregiver or otherwise connected to the child. Instruments that have the most user-appeal often do not have the best psychometric properties. For example, portfolios of children's artistic productions contain rich information but are hard to rate reliably. In the experience of committee members, selection of instruments is often more influenced by cost, by ease of administration, and by use in other equivalent programs than by the criteria proposed here (p.28).

It remains to be seen if the administration will heed this advice in developing and administering this program.



## **Promise Neighborhoods**

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama promised that if he was elected president, he would replicate the Harlem Children's Zone in 20 cities across the country. The resulting initiative, the Promise Neighborhoods program (PNs), is a public-private partnership, with half of the program's funding provided by the federal government while the remainder of the funding obtained from local government and private funds (i.e. philanthropies and businesses). The Promise Neighborhoods grant program is part of the Obama administration's Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative, which includes both the Promise Neighborhoods and Choice Neighborhoods programs. The goal of the initiative is to "support the transformation of distressed neighborhoods into neighborhoods of opportunity - places that provide the resources, and environment that children, youth, and adults need to succeed" (Federal Register, Promise Neighborhoods Planning Grants, 2011). In September 2010, \$10 million in PNs planning grants were awarded to 21 communities. Sites chosen for these grants are required to come up with matching funds, thus expanding the public-private partnership.

"The philosophy behind the project is simple," President Obama. "If poverty is a disease that affects an entire community in the form of unemployment and violence, failing schools and broken homes, then we can't treat those symptoms in isolation. We have to heal the entire community and we have to focus on what works. Using a holistic approach to problems associated with poverty, the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), founded by Geoffrey Canada, takes this "approach to ending generational poverty by developing an array of comprehensive services from cradle to career to improve the lives of children in distressed areas to create a "tipping point" in the neighborhood so that children are surrounded by a solid, enriching environment of college-going peers and supportive adults, antithetical to "street culture" and a destructive

"popular culture that glorifies misogyny and anti-social behavior" (HCZ website). The HCZ serves a 97-block area in central Harlem that combines two charter schools with a variety of community services designed to provide support systems and a positive social environment for children in this area from birth to college graduation (Tough, 2008; Wilson,2010). The HCZ's corporate backers provide the operation with an annual budget of nearly \$64 million dollars.

The HCZ features more than 20 programs that "represent a combination of structural and cultural interventions to help and empower individuals who live in these 97 blocks (Tough, 2008; Wilson,2010). These programs range from family and health programs, and community programs to childhood programs such as Head Start, afterschool programs, and an all day prekindergarten called Harlem Gems. Another program, called The Baby College, is a 9-week workshop for expectant parents and those parents with children up to the age of 3 that stresses such things as the importance of prenatal care, alternatives to physical punishment, reading to children, and handling parental stress (Tough 2008; Wilson 2010; HCZ website). Additionally, there are Promise Academy charter schools. Promise Academy 1 was opened in 2004 with elementary and middle schools. Promise Academy 2 was opened in 2005 with an elementary school. Both Promise Academies will eventually house grades K-12.

In 2010, 300 communities competed for 21 Promise Neighborhoods planning grants to figure out what wraparound services were needed to boost student achievement in their areas. The 21 communities, representing rural, urban, suburban, and tribal areas across the country, received up to \$500,000 each "to design their own pipeline of programs and services that expand access to quality education, healthcare and other vital needs in their areas. Some of the grantees included Boston, New York, Georgia, Texas, and Washington DC. Although President Obama requested \$210 million for the program in his 2011 budget, only \$30 million in funding has been

allocated for the second round of PN grants to be divided between planning and implementation grants. According to Alyson Klein in *Education Week* (2011), up to six communities will be awarded PN implementation grants in 2011 between \$4-6 million dollars annually for three to five years. The 21 communities that received planning grants in 2011 are not guaranteed implementation grants in 2012. Additionally, 10 new planning grants will be awarded during 2012. For the fiscal year 2013 budget, the U.S. Department of Education has proposed \$150 million for the PN program. Although recent legislation has been introduced in Congress to sustain the program for several years, with federal budget cuts and hard-ball politics taking center stage, it remains to be seen how much actual funding will be allocated to this program for next year.

As with the Race to the Top grant competition, schools are the centerpiece of the Promise Neighborhood program model. This aspect of the PN program is very detailed and supported, while other aspects of the program, such as healthcare and housing, are not so explicitly spelled out. As a matter of fact, organizations submitting proposals are given leeway as to what programs, outside of the school mandates, can be initiated in the communities. Applicants for the PN grants must identify a public school or schools to be served and the current status of reforms in that school or schools, including the type of intervention model being implemented or proposed. As noted in Promise Neighborhoods proposal documents, "all eligible applicants must partner with at least one target school that is either a persistently lowest-achieving school, a low-performing school, or an effective school" that would benefit from significant enhancements and expansion of current efforts to improve academics for children in the neighborhood (Promise Neighborhoods FAQs addendum #5, 6/7/2010). Those communities applying for PN grants "may serve an effective school or schools, but only if the community also serves at least one

low-performing school or persistently lowest-achieving school. Applications for Promise Neighborhoods grants must identify and include plans to implement (and actual implementation of this requirement is mandatory) one of the four school-model interventions as outlined in Race to the Top (RttT): Turnaround, Restart, School Closure, and Transformation. Promise Neighborhoods applicants need to "consider how their state's response to the Race to the Top will impact their school partners," and specifically, "applicants should determine whether the 4 school intervention models apply to their partner schools" (Primer, 2010). As per the PN's Notice Inviting Applications in the Federal Register (3/10/2011):

An applicant proposing to work with a persistently lowest achieving school must implement one of the four school intervention models (turnaround model, restart model, school closure, or transformation model). An applicant proposing to work with a low-performing school must implement ambitious, rigorous, and comprehensive interventions to assist, augment, or replace schools, which may include implementing one of the four school intervention models, or may include another model of sufficient ambition, rigor, and comprehensiveness to significantly improve academic and other outcomes for students. An applicant proposing to work with a low performing school must use an intervention that addresses the effectiveness of teachers and leaders and the school's use of time and resources, which may include increased learning time (p.13155).

Some philanthropists and many local organizers have long turned to wide-ranging, comprehensive approaches to fight poverty in communities. However, interest in these comprehensive programs has increased recently with the introduction of federal programs like

the Promise Neighborhoods program and HUD's Choice Neighborhoods programs. In theory, these two programs are meant to work hand-in-hand with each other, and should eliminate silos (business units acting at cross-purposes instead of collaborating with other units that provide the same service). The main focus of the Choice Neighborhoods program is revitalizing public housing (building upon the Hope VI program), coordinating with economic self-sufficiency in the community and linking to local education efforts. Areas chosen for the Choice Neighborhoods grants will already have "potential." Communities awarded these grants should already have support programs in place and have "long-term viability." Long-term viability, as outlined by HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan in testimony before the House Financial Services Committee (2010), "exists in a neighborhood that will build on or bring key neighborhood assets to support the economic and environmental health of the community, including educational institutions, medical centers, central business districts, major employers, effective transportation, or adjacency to low-poverty neighborhoods" (Testimony to Congressional Finance Committee, 3/17/2010).

The primary focus of the Promise Neighborhoods program is education. Arne Duncan has stressed on several occasions that the PNs program brings all the Department's strategies together - high-quality early learning programs and schools, as well as some comprehensive supports to ensure that students are safe, healthy, and successful. According to the *Promise Neighborhoods* website, priority for Promise Neighborhoods will be given to proposals that are "part of, and contributing to an area's broader neighborhood revitalization strategy." With this, PNs grantees "may receive a competitive preference" when applying for Choice Neighborhoods planning grants. In FY 2010, Congress authorized the use of up to \$65 million dollars for a Choice Neighborhood program "demonstration." However, as of this writing, only \$3.6 million

has been allotted for Choice programs in 2011. It is not clear what the status of this program is as Hope VI has been cut from \$200 to \$100 million dollars.

In theory, the concept of a Promise Neighborhood is a good one. Studies indicate that children reared in better neighborhoods have better life outcomes: less affiliation with deviant peer groups, higher levels of family functioning, and overall stronger resources such as youth programming and good quality schools which limit how much time young adults spend unsupervised and subject to unfavorable influences (Krol, 2011). Low-income families often lack information about programs offering free services, as well as transportation to get there (Krol, 2011). Indeed, while there may well be numerous programs in existence that provide free healthcare, afterschool programming, or free childcare (although reductions certainly have been made to all these services in recent years due to budget cuts), they may be located in areas of the city not accessible by public transportation. A major benefit of Promise Neighborhoods programming is that all services are located in the community and residents can more readily and easily obtain information so that these services can be fully utilized. However, the program has been criticized for a number of reasons.

A frequent criticism of the Promise Neighborhoods program involves funding of these competitive grant awards. Serving more than 10,000 young people, the Harlem Children's Zone annual budget hovers around \$60 million. However, it is unlikely that the federal government will fund PNs grants at a level anywhere near this amount. The PNs program has never been funded with a substantial amount of money. The program received \$10 million in its first year, and then received less than \$30 million for FY 2011, even though President Obama sought \$250 million dollars in funding. Given that a rather small amount of money has been appropriated in

Congress for the actual implementation of the planning currently going on in 21 cities across this country, the future of this program seems to be in jeopardy.

Many argue that the problem of poverty is the burden of people living in communities who are too lazy or unmotivated to work, claiming that they do not want their tax dollars going to welfare services that do nothing to decrease the likelihood of the need for future welfare assistance. As Grover Whitehurst wrote in a study of a single charter school in Harlem, HCZ's Promise Academy, "There is no compelling evidence that investments in parenting classes, health services, nutritional programs, and community improvement in general have appreciable effects on student achievement on schools in the U.S." (Whitehurst & Croft, 2010). This is a common neoliberal claim. However, the goal of reducing poverty and breaking the cycle of multi-generational poverty must be kept in mind.

The majority of the winning proposals include ongoing revitalization efforts that seem linked to displacement and gentrification. Several had have community development initiatives in the works for years. For instance, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston boasts redevelopment that has been underway for a number of years. The community is located in a central area of Boston, surrounded by more affluent areas. Sixteen of the 21 communities awarded PNs planning grants are located in or near areas of redevelopment or in close proximity to universities that are also participating in the revitalization efforts of the community. The focus on potentially creating mixed-income communities or creating areas more "appealing to the middle class," as one proposal enthused, gives cause for worry about neighborhood disruption and displacement as the areas improve.

With the advent of new legislation seeking to sustain the PNs program for several years, some have noted that the primary focus of the PNs program seems to be education. The program

must be more than an education program for children, yet the school component of the PNs program as outlined in the Federal Register is the most detailed and comprehensive section of the NIA, requiring those submitting proposals to use one of the 4 school-intervention models to make radical changes in the school community. From the viewpoint of some critics, this places the focus on an educational reform agenda of charter schools and turnarounds. Along with this is the mandate that stresses data systems and teacher accountability requirements in the form of an "intervention" that addresses the effectiveness of teachers and leaders," in other words, teacher assessments. Support programs described in winning PNs proposals that speak to healthcare, crime, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, adult literacy, jobs and other issues facing low-income communities vary with each of the 21 winning proposals, as groups were allowed to design support systems in their communities with little guidance and input from the Promise Neighborhoods program itself. Education is indeed important, but it is only one issue of concern in urban communities. Focusing solely on education would prevent it from addressing the multiple interrelated issues affecting children, their families and communities. It must also be multi-generational and address people and neighborhoods as whole (Lester, 2009).



## Discussion

The United States is at a crossroad. There are currently 25 million Americans either unemployed or underemployed, and American businesses continue to cut wages and benefits. Large amount of goods purchased by Americans are now manufactured elsewhere, as part of a post-industrial economy. By the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, only 12 percent of America's workforce held jobs in manufacturing; by mid-decade this fell to about 9 percent. The numbers continue to plummet. Meanwhile, ranks of the working-age poor have climbed to record levels, the highest since the 1960s. One in 7 people, an estimated 44 million people live in poverty (up from 40 million a year ago) (McCormack, 2009; National Poverty Center). The United States has lost approximately 42,400 factories since 2001 alone, and more than 5 million manufacturing jobs have been lost to overseas competition since October 2000 (McCormack, 2009). In 1959, manufacturing made up 28 percent of the U.S. economic output. By 2008, it represented less than 11 percent of that output. As an example of this trend, Dell Computers recently announced it will be closing its last large manufacturing facility in America in North Carolina. They are simultaneously investing \$100 billion in China to expand operations there over the next decade (McCormack, 2009). This scenario is being played out across the United States and all over the world.

Research shows that on average, families need an income of about twice that of the national poverty level of \$22, 050 a year for a family of four to cover basic expenses. Under this guideline, 42 percent of American children live in low-income families (Cooke, 2011). In 2010, 47 percent of fourth-graders and 45 percent of eighth graders (a 5 percentage point jump) qualified for the National School Lunch Program, which is an indicator of low income status . (Cooke, 2011). According to the USDA, the number of Americans using food stamps

(Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) increased to an all-time high of 45.8 million people in May, or 15 percent of the country's population, and is reported to be 34 percent higher than two years ago (Cooke, 2011).

Real reform must include addressing the very real health, emotional and social issues children bring them to school each and every day, often getting in the way of reading, writing, or taking a test. Yet in the current climate, those who raise the issue of how poverty affects students are labeled defenders of the status quo, someone who uses poverty as an excuse, or someone who believes that certain students cannot learn as well as others.

Increasing the number of standardized tests, extending the school day and year, and making sure students in each state are conforming to the same common standards does not help children who are hungry, sick, or in need of dental and eye exams. To this end, the Obama administration developed and funded the Promise Neighborhoods program, yet the most defined and detailed parts of the program have been those that spell out the requirements for common standards, standardized tests, and charter and turnaround schools, not directly and aggressively confronting poverty's toll on children. The PN programs does indeed have some great elements to it but the prescriptive measures that must be adhered to - school turnarounds, transformations, or charters, as well as the stipulations to evaluate teachers and revitalize a community for potential higher-income wage earners - make it as much a captive of neoliberalism as the Race to the Top program.

Recently, the Woodlawn community, a neighborhood bordering the University of Chicago, was awarded a \$30.5 million Choice grant to redevelop land near the prestigious school. (The Woodlawn Organization also submitted an unsuccessful application last year for a Promise Neighborhoods grant. They plan to submit another application in the coming year,

provided the program receives funding.) Detailed information about the project has yet to be disclosed, however, a news report mentioned that overhauling a school or schools in this area would be part of the deal. It is worth noting that the University of Chicago has opened 3 charter schools in this area, so it would not be unreasonable to assume that they might open another within the next few years. It is also worth noting that the University of Chicago has been attempting to procure land and development deals in the Woodlawn areas for years. Not surprisingly, they now will be able to move forward with those plans. It remains to be seen where current residents will be relocated, and for now, this seems to be a bone of contention with some of the residents. Residents in many communities where PNs grants, and now CHOICE grants, have been awarded are concerned whether they, too, will be able to stay in their neighborhoods once they have been revitalized.

The Harlem Children's Zone model assumes that services must reach 65 percent of the children in a community to achieve a tipping point. However the HCZ took several years, expanding several blocks at a time, with a budget now approaching \$67 million dollars. Approximately two-thirds of the funding comes from private sources.

In their current form, PNs are very different. Grantees are planning projects similar to the HCZ in size and scope, yet they are not sure whether they will be receiving sufficient federal implementation funding. In fact, with funding being reduced each year, and the likelihood of any substantial funding for 2012 in doubt, it is not certain whether any of the winning projects will survive. It will be left up to the communities to aggressively and creatively find other sources of funding. Overall, it is not likely that the PNs program will make progress or expand in the future, essentially making it a failed agenda. Perhaps developed with the best intentions, but not likely to survive in its present form, the concept has merely been co-opted to advance the charter

school and common standards agendas, as a bill has been recently introduced in committee to secure funding for the program - with most of the focus on schools and teachers - for another 5 years.

While the Race to the Top and Promise Neighborhoods programs appear to be two separate and distinct programs, they are, in fact, closely linked in a number of ways:

- both programs assist in the reorganization of education to fit the needs of the economy.
- each program promotes neoliberal concept of competition in an environment of reduced budgets
- the two programs further neoliberal agenda for privatization and profits.
- both RttT and PNs advance educational school reform agenda by encouraging charters, turnarounds, and public school closings, even in the face of contradictory evidence of the effectiveness of these policies.

Essentially, the programs are derived from policies that advance the neoliberal-corporate agenda to privatize (expansion of capital), limit government interference and ultimately, dismantle public education, while preparing students to take their places in a low-wage, competitive world.

With their focus on assessments, common curriculum standards, and transforming or "turning around" schools, both programs advance the neoliberal education privatization agenda. As Saltman (2009) notes, Obama's education policies share this same outlook, "imagining public schooling as a private market within which schools must compete for scarce resources" (p. 54). Coupled with the fact that various groups and "philanthropists" are already profiting from this

agenda, makes it highly unlikely that either program will truly assist students in low-income neighborhoods.

The nature of education is changing in this country and around the world, aligning market ideology with school reform and working towards steering and specialization for limited low-wage jobs. Both RttT and PNs highlight school reform as a central component of their programs, in essence framing schools as the root cause of our economic woes and prescribing privatization or school changes as the cure-all to get American workers back on their feet. For instance, the public often hears the message that our schools need better teachers, as if a high-quality, effective teacher is the only thing that stands between students a high-paying job at a Fortune 500 company. Ironically, these calls for reform come at a time of high unemployment and threats to our social contract (medicare, medicaid, and social security).

Neoliberals believe in markets, individual choice, and privatization. For almost twenty-five years, these ideas have increasingly dominated education policy. In a sense, education now has two purposes: profit and educating the masses for the economy. The United States, England and other countries have embraced school choice as a way to improve education. Much of the choice/markets agenda has been shaped by the criticism of schools as inefficient bureaucracies that are unresponsive either to community or individual interests. Proponents of school choice and markets argue, "efficiency and equity in education could only be addressed through choice and where family or individuals were constructed as the customers of educational services" (Hursh, 2008, p.66). Hence, increasing families' choices and funding schools based on the number of students they enroll introduces a competitive market approach to education.

Advocates of this market approach denounce "state intervention because it is held that administrative and bureaucratic structures are inherently inferior to markets as a means of

allocating resources." (Hursh, 2008, p.66). It is assumed that markets permit individuals to make their own choices without any interference and to choose well. However, it is understood that all markets depend on the state for regulation.

The shift to the promotion of corporate good over social good (or social justice and social welfare) redefines the relationship between society and individual. Where social justice required "decreasing inequality through social programs and a redistribution of resources and power, under neoliberal policies inequality is a result of inadequacies, which is not to be remedied by increasing dependency through the likes of welfare, but by requiring that individuals become productive members of the workforce and get a job" (Hursh, 2008, p.66). Accordingly, neoliberal governments take less responsibility for the welfare of the individual; the individual becomes responsible for him or herself. The goal in all of this is to create a competitive individual who can compete in today's marketplace and fend for him or herself.

Thus, as employment and economic productivity take center stage, education becomes less concerned with developing well-rounded people and more concerned with developing skills required to become one who contributes economically, and hence productively, to society. The change is defined as requiring that "educational systems, through creating appropriately skilled and entrepreneurial citizens and workers able to generate new and added economic values, will enable nations to be responsive to changing conditions within the international marketplace" with less funding (Hursh, 2008, 68). Therefore, neoliberalism aims to reduce funding for education while at the same time reorganizing education to fit the needs of the economy. We see this in both the RttT and PNs programs. As cuts to education are made across the country (cuts to K-12 funding may well reach \$2.5 billion this year), and funding to Title 1 is reduced, Obama and Secretary Duncan aim to put in place funding mechanisms that make permanent the

awarding of education dollars via competitions to enforce the administration's agenda. Indeed, some of the 500 points used to evaluate and choose RttT grant winners are allocated to states that raise or eliminate caps on establishing charter schools. As a consequence of this, many states, including Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Minnesota, Michigan and Tennessee, have passed or have considered passing charter school laws on raising the existing caps on charter schools (Dillon, NY Times, 2010). Some states, such as New York, also have worked to improve their bids for RttT funding by getting teachers' unions to agree to make test scores part of teacher evaluations. As an official with the Department of Education noted, "the competition for \$4 billion dollars in federal funds at a time of budget crisis prodded 34 states to change laws or policies to align themselves with the administration's goals for change." Secretary of the Department of Education, Arne Duncan, adds, "we're getting more change in 18 months in education than in the previous decade" (Gabriel, 2010).

Additionally, note Peterson and Rothstein (2010), the RttT competition "was a trial run for Secretary Duncan of a policy approach he hopes to make permanent. The Obama administration has proposed that formula-driven Title 1 funding be frozen at its present level, without future adjustment for inflation, and that increases in federal education spending be devoted entirely to a new collection of competitive grants" which will create incentives that are similar and some that are different from RttT (p.9). For example, in September 2010, it was reported by the *Chicago Tribune* that Chicago Public Schools were to receive \$35.9 million in federal grants to reward high-quality teachers and to call for a commitment "to measure the value added by every teacher and every school as part of a new data system linking student performance to individual teachers." Illinois also received \$146 million in additional funding from the USDE under a program called the School Improvement Grant Program to assist with

school turnarounds, by implementing one of the four models described in both RttT and PNs. Indeed it is as Saltman notes (2009), the money "that underfunded schools desperately seek allows these philanthropists to 'leverage' influence over educational policy, planning, curriculum and instructional practices, and influence the very idea of what it means to be an educated person" (p.54).

The emphasis on educational reform not only diverts attention away from the negative aspects of policies like reductions in social spending and corporate tax credits, but also transforms the way in which we understand the relationship between the individual and society, and with this, society and community become less important. This individualism is also reflected in the way in which education is organized. With school choice, parents are being encouraged to transfer their children to a variety of schools, therefore negating the need for allegiance to one particular neighborhood school and their incentive to engage and have a stake, so to speak, in the nature and purpose of schooling. Because the focus is now on having schools compete in the marketplace, families no longer have that feeling of collectiveness or shared interests with other families and, instead, become part of the competition for openings at the best schools to give *their* child a leg up.

The neoliberal thought processes of individual responsibility and deference to businesses and corporations have permeated American culture and society and have made citizens less inclined to seek collective power. Indeed the increasingly hostile rhetoric and blaming-the-victim diatribes floated by neoliberals, democrats, and corporate-owned media have diverted the public's attention from issues directly affecting livelihoods and chances for a decent life (tantamount to voting against one's own best interests) to issues concerning gay rights, blacks on welfare, single mothers, illegal immigration, and poorly-run schools, as if political and systemic



institutional structures in the United States and elsewhere do not have a hand in perpetuating inequities and problems in the country. The “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” mentality obfuscates the fact that this country is made up of classes that have been and will be rooted in wealth and your place in society. The current climate exacerbates all of this.

In *The Global City* (2001), Saskia Sassen notes that changes in the world economy are evident in the shift to a globally integrated economic system, which has led to fundamental changes in the organization of employment and urban life. In other words, the restructuring of work, the de-industrialization of economies, and the advanced mobility of capital have altered the landscape of cities. The “global city” becomes a command center in the post-industrial economy which is dominated by highly-skilled service and information industries that have replaced manufacturing as the foundation of the urban economy. However, within this global city, these changes have not been evenly distributed across the socio-economic strata (see hour-glass economy as an example). With the loss of factory jobs, the new global economy has helped to reduce the size of the middle class (Sassen 2001), resulting in the polarization of the labor market and an hour-glass shaped class structure which consists of a number of high-end, high-skilled jobs at one end of the hour glass and low-end, low-skilled service jobs on the other end. Taken together, all of this makes for the urgent need to compete with other cities on a global level to attract high-end workers, residents, and tourists.

Yet, as Anyon & Greene (2007) state, “For more education to lead to better jobs, there have to be jobs available. However, there are not now, nor have there been for more than two decades, nearly enough jobs for those who need them” (p.2). Recently it was reported that the number of people in need of work exceeded the total number of job openings by an average of six to one.

Jobs produced are now primarily poverty-wage jobs – with highly paid positions few and far between- making it increasingly less certain that education will lead to a good-paying job (Anyon, What counts, 2005). More than 77 percent of new jobs over the next decade are projected to be low-paying.

Some researchers have found that the loss of manufacturing, construction and other middle-income jobs signal not only loss wages for workers, but also declining capital and profits for businesses, commonly known as the Crisis of Capital Accumulation. With this, capitalism is faltering and need new areas to exploit because development has slowed in other areas. According to Dave Hill (2006), "this crisis has resulted in intensification of competition between capitals, between national and between transnational capitals and corporations and "the pressure on nations to liberalize services at the national can be seen, therefore, as a response to the declining profitability of manufacturing" (p.3).

Education is quickly becoming a new "venture," a new form of profit. The nation's education industry is a sector that spends about \$800 billion dollars of public money at the local, state, and federal level. With the present administration spending millions of dollars overhauling failing schools and opening new ones, through various grant programs like RttT and PNs, many companies are positioning themselves as experts in the educational field as they compete for the money. This money has the "potential to pump billions of dollars into businesses that serve the education sector - from pencil-makers and textbook publishers to technology providers and management consultants" (McNeil, 2009). Corporations need new forms of capital, so they are turning to developing other areas, as in the case of many of the winning PNs grantees, the development of formerly unprofitable land and resources is becoming big business. Big money is at stake.

Education and entrepreneurs are trying to bring the "same principles of choice to places where schools generally succeed, typically by creating programs called 'boutique charters,' with intensive instruction in a particular area" to suburban school systems. One such school is the new Imagine School in Evanston, Illinois (Hu, 2011). Wealthy investors and banks have been profiting from a little-known federal tax break to finance new charter school construction. A program passed in 2000 by the Clinton administration, "the New Markets Tax Credit, is so lucrative that a lender who uses it can almost double his money in seven years" (Gonzalez, May 7, 2010). So much so, that Penny Pritzker - also a very prominent investor in Chicago's New Schools Fund - has launched a real estate firm to focus on distressed properties (Harris, 2011). Other investors, such as Entertainment Properties Trust and JP Morgan Chase, are following suit (Wolff, 2009).

There are also big salaries to be had as a charter school official. In New York City, several charter school CEOs, including Success Charter Schools head Eva Moskowitz, make as much as \$400, 000 per year to run, at most, a handful of schools, easily surpassing the NYC school chancellor received to run more than 1400 schools (Gonzalez, 2009; Gonzalez, 2010). Yes, indeed, the education reform business is booming.

Additionally, over the last decade, educational reform "has come increasingly under the sway of a new form of philanthropy" - Venture Philanthropy or VP (Saltman, 2009, p. 53). According to Saltman (2009), "venture philanthropy is modeled on venture capital and the investments in the technology boom of the early 1990s," the central agenda being "to transform public education in the United States into a market through for-profit and nonprofit charter schools, vouchers, and scholarship tax credits for private schooling (neovouchers) (p.2). Venture Philanthropy "promotes business remedies, reforms, and assumptions with regard to public

schooling" (Saltman, 2009, p.53). As previously noted, education secretary Duncan and President Obama share these same ideals.

Many of these venture philanthropists stand to make significant inroads and potentially profit from a variety of different areas of education reform. Clearly, it is in their best interest to promote school reform in the United States. Accordingly, VPs such as New Schools for a New Chicago, are being funded by wealthy donors to "create national networks of charter schools, charter management organizations, and educational management organizations (EMOs)" (Saltman, 2009, p.54).

For example, it has been reported that widespread adoption of the new standards advocated in both the RttT and PNs programs, known as the common core, has provoked a race among textbook companies to revise and produce new materials. However, it appears that the Gates Foundation, along with the Pearson Education Foundation, has already won the race. The two foundations have teamed up to create online reading and math courses aligned with the new academic standards that 40 states have adopted in recent months. Twenty-four new courses will use video, games, interactive software, social media and other digital material for math and English lessons, spanning the K-12 grade levels. Pearson Education will market the new courses to schools and districts (Dillon, April 27, 2011).

Groups like hedge funds also stand to profit from education reform programs like PNs, as noted in the article *The Ultimate Superpower* (October 2010). According to Miner (2010), hedge fund operators can make a profit from PNs by investing money for them, as they receive management fees and a percentage of the profits from the investment (6).

Though the neoliberal education agenda shows no sign of slowing down, there is evidence to contradict advocates of charter schools and educational reform agenda who say that these schools are the panacea for all that ails education. Charter schools are primarily attended largely by minority populations, especially African Americans, who are sincerely looking for a quality school that will educate their children. However, numerous studies have shown that charter schools, on average, perform about the same or worse as traditional public schools. Yet, plans like Race to the Top and Promise Neighborhoods move forward with requirements and mandates for the expansion of charter schools, turnarounds and similar "transformational" models.

Research on charter schools highlight results that are consistently on par with or worse than traditional public schools. Several studies show that charter school students do not, on average, outperform traditional public schools (non-charter publics) (Baker & Ferris, 2011; CREDO, 2009; Bonds, Epps & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; RAND 2003; Ravitch 2010). The most extensive study of charters so far was done by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University (2009). This looked at more than 2,400 charter schools in 16 states, and compared them to traditional public school students. The findings must have been disheartening to charter school advocates, including the Obama administration, for the research showed that charters perform worse on average than traditional public schools. Only 17 percent of charters produce superior results, 37 percent worse results, and the remainder, 46 percent, about the same as traditional public schools (CREDO, 2009).

In Chicago, where Arne Duncan was once CEO of the city's schools, a series of studies paint an unimpressive picture of Renaissance 2010, the program that is the model for his Race to the Top reform plan. One report by the Renaissance Schools Fund in Chicago found that students

in Renaissance schools performed on a par with nearby neighborhood schools (Banchemo, 2010). While recent state test results show that Chicago's charter schools - which usually have more instructional class time- have a lower percentage of students exceeding standards, the new Chicago mayor, Rahm Emmanuel, continues charter school expansion, recently announcing plans for The Academy for Urban School Leadership to open several new charters and moving forward with the push for a longer school day and school year (Vevea, 2011). The analysis found that, on average, charter schools and city turnaround schools perform on a par with neighborhood schools, "despite the additional classroom time for charters, suggesting that the influence of more time is unclear" (Vevea, 2011).

Research on online charter schools is worse. According to a recent study done by the U.S. Department of Education, online instruction for K-12 students has little or no research backing. There is a lack of scientific evidence of the effectiveness of online classes, according to the authors of the study (Means, 2008; Ravitch, 2010). Results from a study on the impact of Milwaukee's school voucher initiative find that "the educational needs of black students in voucher schools have not been met" (Farrell & Mathews, 2006). The RAND Corporation reported in a recently published study (2011) found no change in student achievement as a result of New York City's teacher bonus program. A Vanderbilt University study (Barkan, 2011) confirms this finding. These results add to the growing body of evidence nationally that pay-for-performance bonuses have no effect on student achievement. In fact, there is evidence emerging that indicates widespread cheating on standardized tests as states and local schools increasingly tie teacher's pay to student test scores. Scandals have recently been uncovered in Philadelphia, Atlanta, New York, Baltimore and Washington DC. An investigation into Atlanta's school cheating scandal found that teachers at one school sneaked tests from the school and held a party

at a teacher's home to change answers ("Cheaters, 2011). Other studies indicate that there is high turnover of teachers in charter schools, with nearly 50 percent of teachers in charter middle and high schools leaving their jobs each year over a six-year period studied by University of California Berkeley researchers (Blume, 2011).

However, given the money and power behind charter schools, it is very likely that they are here to stay. Likely too will be that charter schools will only enroll the motivated children of the poor, while regular public schools will become schools of last resort for those who were not accepted or who never applied. The traditional public schools "will enroll a disproportionate share of students with learning disabilities and students who are classified as English-language learners; they will enroll the kids from the most troubled homes, the ones with the worst attendance records and the lowest grades and test scores" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 220). Indeed, as an analysis of the Ren2010 plan by the Chicago Teachers Union shows, Chicago charters enroll "a smaller proportion of special needs students, a smaller proportion of economically disadvantaged students, and a smaller proportion of limited English proficient students than CPS schools as a whole" (Woesthoff, 2005, p.11). In other urban districts, such as the Milwaukee Public Schools, similar enrollment patterns have emerged. According to an article in the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* (2005), evidence has emerged that shows that neighborhood schools "get a disproportionate share of children who have challenging special needs and behavior problems" (Borsuk, Section A News, 2). Indeed a 2002 study indicates that some charter schools may not be serving students "whose language or special education needs make them more costly to educate" (Lacrieno, Holyoke, Moser & Henig, 146).

Public education is often touted as the "cure-all" for overcoming poverty and climbing the economic and social ladder. Yet it seems to have become the proverbial whipping boy for

politicians and policymakers who blame our country's woes on teachers and schools. However, one theme seems to resonate loud and clear from all of this: A school is not a separate and distinct entity from the community it serves. Schools and education are intertwined with a whole host of issues, influencing job opportunities, where families live, and determining the forecast for the entire country's economic future. Public schools in communities with "low opportunity" (those communities with disinvestment, blight, and high levels of unemployment) and subject to disinvestment have suffered economic devastation and suffer from a lack of educational resources. These communities are often "beset by the problems that accompany poverty such as when parental support for students is compromised by the need to work long hours-sometimes at 2 and 3 jobs-for low wages" (Saltman 9). Some educators feel that the obstacles faced by students in poor communities and schools require greater investments in those schools than in wealthy schools; while neoliberals, using programs like Race to the Top and Promise Neighborhoods work to defund traditional public schools and promote charter schools, vouchers, and turnarounds.

With their focus on assessments, common standards, and transforming schools, the Race to the Top and Promise Neighborhoods programs are directly focused on advancing the neoliberal agenda of privatization, and not on helping to eradicate poverty. Both programs are tied up in efforts to reform teacher pay - tying pay to performance - and to increase the number of charter schools and voucher programs in the country. In fact, a requirement of the RttT and PNs programs is that successful grant winners use 1 of 4 models to reform a school or schools in their communities. The analysis of the PNs program also revealed that the more specific and well-defined points of this competition pertain to school reform, leaving the individual



community to determine which, if any, of the various family services like healthcare and housing, will be provided.

Additionally, the CHOICE program (a replacement program for HUD's Hope VI, designed to help areas with low income housing) was supposed to tie in with the PNs program, but it seems officials are moving away from linking two, leaving some communities without much hope for funding of low income housing development. With this and the PNs program, there is also the issue of which communities are being granted the funding. An analysis of several winning community proposals reveals that many of these areas slated for PNs or CHOICE funding, such as the Woodlawn community in Chicago and the Dudley Street Initiative in Boston, are adjacent to areas being redeveloped or gentrified, or are themselves in the process of redeveloping.

Yet, as Anyon states in *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement* (2005), “macroeconomics policies like those regulating minimum wage, job availability, tax rates, federal transportation, and affordable housing create conditions in cities that no existing educational policy can transcend” (59). “The disparities between the quality of white and black students’ educational experiences have as much, if not more, however, to do with ‘extra-school related factors’-factors outside of school-related to the disproportionate and highly concentrated community and school poverty of black children” (Street xiii). In other words, we must consider and address student experiences outside of the classroom.

David Berliner (2009), in his study of out-of-factors that influence school success, noted that several factors play a powerful role in school achievement: inadequate healthcare, food insecurity, family relations and family stress, low birth-weight and prenatal influences, environmental pollutants, extended learning opportunities, and neighborhood characteristics. Indeed, an overwhelming body of research shows that student achievement in schools is most

closely tied to the home conditions of poor children, overshadowing the quality of the school, state standards, or teacher quality (Berliner, 2005; Berliner, 2009). Unfortunately, the Promise Neighborhoods program, or the Race to the Top program for that matter, in their current forms do not assist in reducing or eliminating any of these factors.

Many children in low-income families grow up in households with families who have had little education. The parents have worked jobs that are mainly low-wage that require little formal education. In turn, their children begin their schooling already behind middle-class children. Unemployment, low-wage employment, drug-dealing, police harassment, et.al., teach low-income children early-on lessons of pessimism, fearfulness, scarcity and mistrust. According to Stone and Worg (as ref in Giloth, 2007), “trust rarely extends beyond a few close friends and family” (269), thus institutions (such as schools) and organizations are looked upon with indifference and mistrust. Giloth (2007) also notes that because parents in these communities are the least empowered to challenge their schools, “schools in lower-income neighborhoods often have the weakest administrators and least-qualified teachers” (271).

Once we confront that fact that schools alone cannot eradicate poverty, we must implement reforms that reduce things like substance abuse problems, food insecurity, and provide more adequate housing for low-income families. Additionally, we need to begin to utilize public education to build, as Anyon offers, a progressive social reform movement (2005). There seems to be a number of communities organizing around both social and educational equality, such as the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), which was made up of low and moderate income families (the group is now defunct). ACORN had approximately 750 neighborhood chapters in 60 cities. According to Anyon (2005), ACORN played a big role in 2002, organizing Brooklyn parents to vote against the privatization of their

schools by Edison, Inc. ACORN had also been active in school funding issues, affordable housing, living wage, and community reinvestment. Organizations such as these remind us that effective and long lasting education reform is deeply connected to community and social reform. This connection has, of late, been lost within all of the public discussions and policy debates, and of course the destruction and defunding of ACORN after the eruption of a public scandal.

As we bounce back and forth from one education trend to the next, we can clearly see how the absence of economic reform informs what types of changes are made in our public schools. Yet, even though there are now an increasing number of people living in poverty, it seems highly unlikely that policymakers will see the relationship between that fact and the low-performance of poor children.

As the stakes surrounding No Child Left Behind rise higher and higher, and as resistance to NCLB continues to grow, a multi-pronged approach is needed because issues of schooling are interconnected to so many other things like housing, poverty, and culture (Schemo 2006). Promoting social equity requires explicit, substantial investments in jobs that are customized to connect low-income families to economic opportunity, and in healthcare, housing, childcare, and other critical family support services. As Richard Rothstein concluded in *Class and Schools* (2004):

We can make big strides in narrowing the student achievement gap,  
but only by directing greater attention to economic and social reforms  
that narrow the background characteristics with which children come  
to school...If the nation can't close gaps in income, health, and housing,

there is little prospect of equalizing achievement.

Yet, protests and grassroots organizations that have sprung up in recent years present an opportunity to make alternatives possible and to change the direction of education and economic justice in this country. Lipman (2011) notes, “this is an important opportunity to stretch beyond tinkering at the edges of a dysfunctional economy and encrusted inequalities and injustices and to harness collective wisdom and political will toward fashioning a sustainable, democratic, socially just alternative” (167). Presently, a global grassroots movement is garnering support and gaining momentum with Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Chicago, and over 950 similar protests around the world. This movement is giving voice to struggles and problems that have been accumulating for decades: wars, dislocated populations, vast economic inequalities and threats to the ecology of this planet. These difficulties shed light on the economic and social suffering of children and their families: long-term unemployment, homelessness, and food insecurity. Certainly education will play a critical and pivotal role in this reimagining of a more democratic and just society.

In recent years, organizations such as Teachers for Social Justice, NY CORE, along with publications such as Rethinking Schools, have spurred an interest and growth in social justice teaching, social justice-oriented schools, and youth programs and projects based in the community. These groups have joined with parents and community organizations to halt school privatization and challenge high stakes testing. Although the way forward may seem a bit unclear, it is of the utmost importance to recognize the ongoing work accomplished by those who struggle against corporate reforms such as school privatization, Race to the Top, and the Promise Neighborhoods. These groups and activists have organized boycotts and walk-outs, and have

spoken out at school board meetings and other public events about the problems inherent in pursuing a corporate agenda in education. As we question and challenge these changes, however, it is necessary for us to understand how education plans such as those outlined in both RttT and PNs are merely symptoms of much broader issues concerning democratic societies here and around the world. As Saltman notes in *The Edison Schools* (2005), “The same neoliberal ideology that aims to privatize and commercialize schools, to teach students to make an enterprise of themselves, is the same neoliberal ideology that has dismantled welfare and gutted and privatized social services domestically; it is the same neoliberal ideology that uses state resources to invest in disciplinary tactics throughout civil society; and is the same neoliberal ideology that the government exports through the threats of military and economic revenge” (p. 206). So, as protests against school closings, the expansion of for-profit charter schools, and tying teacher pay to performance and high stakes tests grow, we must also be cognizant of the larger issues and begin to address the dangers posed to calls for a more just, equitable and democratic society.

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