

The Children of Choice: Public Education Reform and the Evolution of Neoliberal Governance

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## Preface

The need for a drastic improvement in the public schools of the United States is unquestionable. Amidst rising income inequality, disappearing opportunities for higher education and employment, and a pervasive sense of national disunity, the need for a robust public school system that can successfully teach not only academic knowledge but the skills needed to function in a deliberative democracy is acute. This work is dedicated to the thousands upon thousands of people are working every day to improve public education. Their effort is often selfless, tireless, and not compensated at anything like an appropriate level.

That proposals for education reform have become highly politicized is no secret. Debates over the proper roles of the state versus private enterprise in educating children often take an acrimonious tone, and there is much jockeying among groups for position as authentic representatives of the interests of children and families. Events such as the mass firing of teachers at a failing school in Rhode Island or recent negotiations between Seattle Public Schools and the Seattle Education Association demonstrate that there is much at stake in determining the future course of the public education system of this country.

The aim of this thesis is not to evaluate the effectiveness of any of the initiatives or proposals discussed within. Nor is it a rigorous empirical study that can supply nomothetic explanations for current trends in education policy. It is, instead, an exploratory exercise in bringing together a diverse set of literatures together with some case studies in order to suggest new directions for theory. I say this because too often, critical academics – the professional category to which I belong – have too often reactively condemned what they see to be

manifestations of regressive social change and the agents who bring it about. I believe that current reforms in education are indicative of changes at a deeper level in the broader political economy of our country and indeed the larger world; I also believe that the overall direction of this shift is towards an engrained neoliberalism that is increasingly organizing economic, political, and social life, and I remain critical towards this shift. At the same time, I do not believe that the reforms that I examine here are easily reducible to a politics of market fundamentalism. Neither are the people carrying them out or advocating for them simply dupes or cronies of a malevolent ideological agenda. I have tried throughout this work to present the information I have gathered in a respectful yet critical way, focusing on the larger picture rather than bringing in individuals or their work for critique. As this is my first large-scale work as a professional academic, it is highly likely that I have not fully realized that goal. I apologize in advance for any inaccuracy or mischaracterization in the portrayals of individuals and organizations I offer here, and welcome feedback from those who appear in these pages.

This thesis would not have been possible without the generous participation of people working inside and outside the Seattle public school system who freely gave their time to speak with me and share their insights. I am extremely grateful to them, and wish them the very best in their efforts for the future of public education in this country. Thanks are also due to my MA committee: Katharyne Mitchell offered guidance and put up with my many caprices and flights of fancy, and Vicky Lawson played an invaluable mentoring role without which my perspectives on public scholarship would be very much the poorer. In the fall of 2010 I had the exceptional opportunity to interact with Dr. Ananya Roy in the context of a microseminar at the University of Washington, an experience that has profoundly shaped my views on positioning research informants with respect and consideration. Many of my classmates,

especially the members of the 2009 graduate cohort in the UW Department of Geography, provided academic and personal support in ways that were essential to my work.

Finally, I thank Dorothy for her unconditional support throughout this process in innumerable small and large ways, particularly in letting me orate on many occasions for a half hour or more about an idea in impenetrable academic-ese. My gratitude and love for you is boundless.

## The Children of Choice: Public Education Reform and the Evolution of Neoliberal Governance

### **Overview: Market-based school reform at the heart of neoliberalism's evolution**

Scholars today understand that contemporary governance in the West has unquestionably been driven by neoliberal principles since at least the early 1980s. What began as an ideologically specific project of American and British adherents to the neoliberal doctrines associated with Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek to dismantle government management of the economy has, over time, been accepted by a wide swath of the political spectrum. In particular the practices and narratives of “third way” governance that first emerged under the administrations of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair have reintroduced the national government as a strategic partner with local and regional governments, the private sector, and non-profit organizations. Rather than simply handing over its regulatory power, central governments are changing their relationships with municipal and regional governments in a way that is, in the words of Peck, (1999) “differently powerful” from previous models of Fordist and statist government. This “difference” has largely come in the form of shifting from a model of centrally-organized sovereign power to a devolvement of responsibility for social governance.

At the same time, education reform has come to the forefront of political debate. In the United States, there exists a pervasive rhetoric of the failure of public schools to adequately educate citizens in the skills and acumen necessary to prosper in a globalized and deindustrialized economy (e.g. Henig 1994; Ravitch 2010). In response, advocates for reform based on market-based principles of educational choice have coalesced into a powerful bloc comprising grassroots groups of parents, non-profit organizations, and especially philanthropic

foundations. Set within a larger environment of mistrust for government management of functions typically within the arena of public policy, choice-based<sup>1</sup> reform advocates are advancing an argument in which the agency of parents and students to choose educational options for themselves is the most effective means of equitably distributing positive learning outcomes. This is typically coupled with a discourse that proposes private sector managerial mechanisms as the best facilitator of choice. Supported by the finances and publicity of major corporate foundations – among them the Gates, Broad, Walton, and Ford Foundations – choice-based reforms are decisively reshaping educational governance at the local as well as national scales across the country. Charter schools, publicly funded schools operated outside of the local school district, are one of the most popular mechanisms championed by choice school reformers. Other proposed reforms range from modifying the existing public education system by introducing accountability or efficiency measures or privatizing the system either in part or whole. Overall, despite the ambivalent outcomes of choice-based education regimes (e.g. Powers and Cookson 1999; Goldhaber and Eide 2002), support for choice remains strong, particularly among minority populations in low-performing urban school districts (Fusarelli 2003).

I argue that the restructuring of public education in the United States is intimately related to the larger restructuring of the political economy. In particular, I follow Thiem (2009) in arguing that the restructuring underway in public education is in fact creating new political spaces of hybrid governance that bring together the public and the private in new, creative ways as part of neoliberalism's continuous evolution. In the case of education, the choice-based reform

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<sup>1</sup> Many commentators and critics identify the collection of contemporary education reform policy options as “market-based” to underline the tendency of reformers to explicitly profess a normative vision of education as a market in which schools must compete to secure students and funding by providing superior service. While agreeing with this assessment, I will use the “choice-based” (or simply “choice”) epithet in order to most closely reflect their discursive portrayal (accurately or not) as policies that empower parents and children to choose the highest possible quality program of education.

movement has been especially successful at creating multiple links between national networks of education reform knowledge and funding on the one hand and local schools and advocates on the other. This reach across scale is normalizing a model of neoliberal governance that simultaneously takes advantage of large-scale resources for research and political mobilization and the motivation of local actors whose consent to individual projects insulate them from suspicions of “top-down” governance. Additionally, the participation of philanthropic interests accelerates and intensifies what is already a rapid transfer of knowledge and policy practices between places: by competitively awarding funds for reform efforts to the local level, the choice-based reform movement can draw on a multiplicity of willing participant sites within which to test its innovations. In this way education reform fits into a “trial and error” process by which the broader neoliberal project continues its uneven expansion and exacerbates existing inequalities between places (Peck *et al.* 2010).

My research tests these hypotheses by investigating both the overall shape of contemporary education governance and specific reform efforts carried out over the past decade. In the case study I examine below, I interrogate new logics of citizenship, urban politics, and local governance that transcend the reform of education but nevertheless lie at its very heart. In the process of reforming education, I hypothesize that a new logic of citizenship formation is being developed and tested through the education of youth on a daily basis. These youth – whom I term the “Children of Choice” – are being educated in a fundamentally different system than those that came before them, and I argue that it is of vital importance that we understand the evolving governance networks driving school reform so that we can understand how the subjectivity of parents, students, and teachers is likewise being reshaped. I use the Seattle school district – Seattle Public Schools (SPS) – as my case study both because Seattle is my home and

because SPS presents a prescient site in which to examine reform efforts. This is primarily due to three important education geographies that uniquely situate the city: first, charter schools are not permissible under Washington state law, a fact that has channeled choice-based reform energy into a variety of alternative strategies. Second, the presence of the Gates Foundation situates Seattle at a crossroads of both globally and locally directed philanthropic activity. And third, the choice-based reform movement remains relatively new in Seattle. Whereas other urban school districts have experienced profound change as a result of choice-based reform, large-scale efforts to radically remake education governance are only beginning to coalesce here. To examine how Seattle fits into larger trends of school reform and the evolution of neoliberal governance more broadly, I examine both the development of choice-based reform efforts within the district at large through the elaboration of an initiative to develop small and often thematic learning academies within existing schools and the particular case of Cleveland High School in South Seattle. Cleveland has been the subject of a decade of sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory reform efforts from both the public and private sectors; these efforts illustrate how the school as well as the larger district have acted as a distillation point for trends in education reform as well as the evolution of neoliberal governance.

Overall, I argue that there is a recursive relationship between the everyday discourses and practices of education reform and idealized models for market-driven education. Created within the funding guidelines of corporate philanthropy, choice-based reform projects are inevitably modified by the realities of their local circumstances – with the most successful being reincorporated into advocacy and philanthropic organizations’ publicity networks as “best practices” to be emulated elsewhere. Following Peck and Tickell’s (2002) call to trace links between “actually existing neoliberalism” and a seemingly monolithic neoliberal regime, I

maintain that this process of implementation/evaluation/transposition is a key mechanism by which neoliberalism gradually advances its ideological hegemony. Moreover, within this mechanism, local actors – administrators, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders – are not simply mindlessly consenting accessories to an overbearing neoliberal regime. Rather, they fulfill a crucial role in legitimizing the role of local participation in developing and transmitting choice policies. Nevertheless, they facilitate a process of reform that in many cases glosses over historical structural inequalities embedded in place and assumes a level playing field in the race for reform.

Three analytical frameworks guide my discussion. First, I argue that the ideological underpinnings of choice-based school reform are inscribed in a shift in a conception of active democratic participation from one based on inter-community solidarity to one based on individual choice and initiative. Second, I show how choice-based school reform projects are embedded in systems of interurban competition as cities attempt to act entrepreneurially to attract public and private investment opportunities. Finally, the practice of choice-based school reform is fundamentally one that produces the participation of local communities in reforming education and then co-opts this participation by using it to create school test sites in which their financial backers' priorities are tested and evaluated. Successful test sites go on to provide inspiration for other schools and districts; failed test sites are forgotten and frequently abandoned by the fiscal capital that brought them into being, leaving the community to deal with the fallout. I briefly introduce the major theoretical points of each below before contextualizing them in the education reform efforts of the Seattle metropolitan region. In sum, as schools and communities appeal to the choice-based reform network of non-profit advocacy and philanthropic organizations for support, in turn this network portrays its role in education reform as facilitating

the will of local coalitions of everyday people striving for a more responsive public education system. To understand who these everyday people are and how they understand the public school system to have failed in its mission, though, it is necessary to interrogate how the choice-based school reform movement defines its participants and its goals.

## **I. Reevaluating the grassroots and citizenship in the school reform movement**

Stand for Children is an innovative, grassroots child advocacy organization.

Our mission is to use the power of grassroots action to help all children get the excellent public education and strong support they need to thrive. Our members believe we need to stand up for our children now - particularly for their education from pre-school through high school - to create a better future for America.

We build effective local and statewide networks of grassroots advocates capable of convincing elected officials to invest in and reform children's programs. Following specific priorities chosen by our members, we focus on securing adequate funding for public schools and reforming education policies and practices to help children thrive academically, giving them the opportunities they need to become successful, productive citizens ("About Stand for Children, available: <http://www.stand.org/Page.aspx?pid=1268>).

Participants in education reform, as in many other social reform movements, draw upon a particular political vocabulary in order to legitimize their claims. In the above excerpt from the national advocacy organization Stand for Children's (SfC) website, several key words – "innovative," "chosen," and "opportunity" – signal a kind of local, self-determined, and active citizenship that is at the heart of ideal models of contemporary governance. Interestingly, the word that SfC uses to describe both itself and the networks it creates through its work – "grassroots" – seems to be somewhat elusive, at least in terms of the organization's leadership; looking at SfC's national board of directors reveals its composition to be made up of two private equity investors, the founder of the Hanna Andersson clothing company, SfC's CEO, a partner in the for-profit New Schools Venture Fund, and two representatives from social service foundations. More locally, the Seattle-based League of Education Voters (LEV) provides another ambiguous use of language in its self-description:

Citizen-founded and citizen-funded, LEV is the only Washington-based organization working to improve education from early learning through higher education... We're parents who believe in the power of grassroots and political action ("Who We Are," available: <http://www.educationvoters.org/about-2/>; accessed 3/28/2011; emphasis in the original).

Notably for an organization that makes special mention of its "citizen-funded" status, LEV has received \$3.23 million of funding from the similarly Seattle-based Gates Foundation.<sup>2</sup> While technically Bill and Melinda Gates are "citizens," arguably LEV's Gates-supported activities are not necessarily what many people would typically associate with the images of participatory democracy conjured by LEV's description.

In order to understand the claims made by the choice-based reform advocacy network, it is perhaps necessary to rethink terms such as "citizen" and "grassroots." It is unlikely that these organizations are presenting a sham model of democratic participation in reforming education governance; rather, the meanings of the terms themselves have evolved to reflect a new reality for available avenues of political participation. Indeed, amidst the devolvement, privatization, and contractualization of government under neoliberalism, ideal ways of being a subject of government itself are changing as well. According to Nikolas Rose, as individuals, families, and communities are made to become increasingly responsible for their well-being and prosperity,

it seems as if we are seeing the emergence of a range of rationalities and techniques that seek to govern without governing society, to govern through regulated choices made by discrete and autonomous actors in the context of their particular commitments to families and communities (1996, 328).

This logic lies at the heart of the "differently powerful" model of contemporary governance coined by Peck (1999). Rather than trying to integrate facets of public service into an overarching policy of social engineering, governance regimes in the neoliberal era operate by delineating discrete fields of service – education, for example – and encouraging stakeholders to make their own opportunities for getting involved in these areas. This brand of

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix A for a table of recent Gates grants to the LEV.

involvement is one that simultaneously retracts government involvement from the management of structural relations of political economy even as it privileges an “active” citizenship based on the desire of individual actors maximize their potential. Barbara Cruikshank (1999) further hypothesizes that this “will to empower” has the effect of motivating individuals, families, and communities to act on their own behalf while aligning their sense of agency with neoliberal goals of divestment and privatization. As empowerment and the promise of better government through active citizenship gain political currency, evidence is mounting that the participation of non-profit or “third sector” organizations in public service provision is successfully encouraging individuals, families, and communities to practice self-governance while depoliticizing the reasons for which the state is abdicating its public service functions in the first place (e.g. McKee 2011; Gaynor 2009).

The self-help logic of contemporary public service provision fits well with discourses that have characterized choice-based school reform. Two broad narratives embedded deep in American cultural awareness underlie these discourses: first, public education’s “failure” to adequately prepare American students for the economic circumstances of post-industrial, globalized society; and second, a pervasive mistrust of government-fostered “dependency” inherited from the ideological and political assault on Federal welfare during the 1980s and 90s. On the basis of these deeply-engrained understandings, choice reform advocates have sought to produce consent to their proposals for school reform by counterpoising an unresponsive, sluggish public school system with the empowering potential of parents’ and students’ self-determination in matters of education. Fascinatingly, this dichotomy is employed along a wide swath of the political spectrum: from Davis Guggenheim’s 2010 documentary *Waiting for Superman* (see, for example, Ravitch 2010b) to Merrifield’s (2001) sneering

remark that public education is in reality and should be regarded as nothing other than “government education,” broad sectors of the American political liberal and conservative establishments agree that public education stifles opportunities for children to excel. The solution, it is assumed, is to encourage schools to innovate so that they can compete for the business of parents and their children. Indeed, some have advocated explicitly for importing business management principles to education. Education scholar and for-profit education entrepreneur John Chubb suggests that the *fait accompli* of private enterprise’s involvement in education should be utilized to their full potential in order to reform or circumvent school districts “paralyzed by politics,” “bogged down by bureaucracy,” and “incapable of innovation” (2005, 23). Whatever the specific means proposed, choice-based mechanisms remain primary as the means of empowerment. In speaking of the drastic improvement he oversaw in New York City’s Community School District 4 during the 1980s, Seymour Fliegel claims:

Effective education requires hard work, commitment, focus, and a productive learning environment. These qualities are necessary for teachers and for students. Choice alone cannot supply them. But what choice can do, particularly where a school system is failing, is to *unleash the latent positive energy in students and teachers and bring it to bear on the educational process, thereby eliminating the institutional and social barriers to constructive change, getting bureaucracy out of the way*, permitting people to concentrate on what is of vital importance to them, and letting people teach and learn (1993, 12; emphasis added).

Today, choice-based school reform is one mechanism by which notions of what it means to be an active citizen are being reshaped. By offering avenues to families to take control of their children’s education over and against a supposedly impersonal and indifferent public school system, choice is politically potent even as the substance of its policies and practices are depoliticized. Its common-sense propositions – that children should be given the opportunity to thrive academically – shifts the definition of active citizenship from a formal one, in which the identity of participants is linked to a movement’s goals, to a functional one, in which the creation of opportunities for political participation through any means is

privileged. Indeed, as Lahann and Regan (2011) suggest, the choice-based reform movement has had a great deal of success partly on the strength of organizations such as Teach for America that poignantly articulate the tragic implications of public education's inadequacy while embracing neoliberal principles of accountability, competition, and labor flexibility as solutions. By this logic the participation of corporate philanthropy at the heart of a movement to reclaim public education for families and children is not a contradiction in terms; it enhances funding opportunities and policy creation networks and so is vital to the success of the choice-based school reform movement.

## **II. School reform ventures as a practice of urban entrepreneurialism**

In 1995, against a backdrop of academic decline and public dissatisfaction with Seattle Public Schools, three education-related organizations with similar goals reorganized and merged to create the Alliance for Education.

The objective of the newly formed Alliance was to serve as a catalyst for change, a convener of community leadership, and a conduit for directing private resources — both dollars and expertise — toward critical needs in Seattle Public Schools. With Chief Executive Officer Robin Pasquarella at the helm of the Alliance, and with John Stanford serving as schools superintendent, the Alliance developed a unique and lasting partnership with Seattle Public Schools.

(“Our History,” Alliance for Education website; available: <http://www.alliance4ed.org/history.htm>)

In the advanced economies of the West, the devolvement of governmental responsibility to smaller scales has been a familiar fixture of neoliberal governance over the past three decades. It is becoming clear, though, that this devolvement amounts to more than the simple “roll-back” that characterized the period of early neoliberalism. In particular municipal government has become responsible for the successful execution of social service provision even as the power to determine how these services are to be delivered is retained at higher levels (May *et al.* 2005). At the same time, pressures to innovate are mounting as cities

compete with each other to capture flows of capital investment and consumer activity (Harvey 1989, Swyngedouw 1992, Leitner and Sheppard 1998).

The urban therefore has become a space within which a diverse and sometimes contradictory collection of forces respond to the double pressure of being responsible to both internal constituencies and external scrutiny by public and private stakeholders. Within the broad neoliberal regime, cities act as a pivot translating policy conceived at broad political and ideological scales to forms that are legible to local constituencies while simultaneously repackaging their internal efforts at innovation for consumption by larger policy-making networks (Brenner and Theodore 2002b). Moreover, the relationship between city government and service provision is increasingly mediated by a cadre of nonprofit organizations that act variously as proxies for both urban government and the constituencies they serve. In Seattle, the relationship between SPS and the Alliance for Education as described above offers an example of the former that is emblematic of the transformation of the urban into a space in which the ideological projects of the neoliberal regime are being translated into instances of “actually existing” neoliberal policy. By acting in its self-described triple role as a “catalyst,” “convener,” and “conduit” the Alliance allows SPS to be multiply and actively responsive to local and extralocal stakeholders. At the same time, its adherence to investment practices normalizes at the heart of education governance principles of accountability, competition, and innovation as imported from the business sector.

As notions of active citizen participation are being reworked at a discursive level, so are functions of urban government being hybridized at the level of everyday policy. As a result, cities are becoming increasing fractured political spaces in which contradictions between values and practices of governance are expressed and resolved. As Murphy (2009)

documents in the case of homeless policy in San Francisco, cities' roles as the local agents of neoliberal regimes often lead to ambivalent responses to the management of social problems. Mindful of appealing to both circuits of investment capital and the political support of local constituencies, city government often finds itself in the simultaneous positions of taking a heavy hand toward the management of undesirable populations in order to add value to urban space while offering concessions to these same populations to present an image of humane governance (see also Verteuil *et al.* 2009). In the case of education, less is known about city government as a decision-making unit in crafting and executing policy (although the role of school reform coalitions in state politics has been extensively documented, e.g. Fusarelli 2003). Nevertheless, the complex networks of actors and stakeholders of individual urban education regimes plays a key role in mediating local instances of school reform as they move through processes of implementation, evaluation, and documentation. As the example of Seattle will show, school reform projects do not occur in a vacuum but are subject to the political contingencies of sometimes-contentious relationships between local government, private stakeholders, and non-profit organizations. These relationships also interact with contradictions internal to public urban governance. As Beckett and Herbert (2010) note in their work on policing strategies in Seattle, city governments often do not act of one mind in their responses to issues and policies filter through conflict and negotiation between different bureaucratic bodies.

In addition to being realized through a network of relationships between the public and private sectors, school reform efforts rely on a reimagining of the space of the city as a container within which a specific set of failures of public education are bounded. While connecting to national narratives of failing schools, elaborations of education problems that

cast failing schools in terms of the responsibility of an urban community are key to recruiting coalitions of funders, advocates, and government agencies that can coalesce around an achievable goal and draw upon a knowable constituency for political support. Building upon common tropes of public education's abject failure, the space of the city is reimagined as a community of common cause for education reformers. In effect, the interests of the public and private sectors sharing a common urban space are collapsed into one another and their differences minimized to result in a sphere of urban governance that is open to intervention from both spheres. However, not all coalitions are equally well situated to draw on this spatial imaginary. While localizing problems of education serves as a powerful tool to generate support and resources for reform projects, it is those actors who are also able to connect the problems of their city to larger-scale causes and resources. As will be seen, choice-based coalitions in and around Seattle have been more successful in influencing policy precisely because of their ability to effectively portray issues of education at multiple scales.

Additionally, imagining education failures at the scale of a metropolitan region sometimes serves to mask unequal geographic distributions of struggling schools. Rather than referring specifically to schools in poor or immigrant-heavy neighborhoods as sites where intervention is needed, generalizing the failures of individual schools to the scale of the urban region facilitates coalition-building by expanding the space within which participation in reform efforts can be generated and advocates and resources can be drawn. In Seattle, depictions of school failure have been ambiguous in this regard. Struggling schools are heavily concentrated in the city's poorer and non-white southeastern and far northeastern neighborhoods and have been singled out for intervention efforts. At the same time, coalition-building efforts have concentrated on presenting a crisis of education that is spread throughout

the space of the city and its suburbs and therefore the potential concern of all people and organizations within the metropolitan region. As I elaborate later, this ambiguity has had the effect of concentrating choice-based reform efforts in certain schools and neighborhoods – themselves the victims of generations of racialized patterns of urban neglect and underfunding – under the aegis of district-wide education reform agendas.

### **III. Resituating the local as a space of governance**

Three interrelated bases [of emerging forms of local governance] exist: local government reform, the third sector as an independent entity, distinct from the state and the market and community development as a contested yet key practice of facilitating democratic change and challenging oppressive practice. These interconnected elements are crucial in shaping for better or worse the fabric of much local community life; so what happens to them both independently and in synergic isolation matters, never more so than at a time of recession, retrenchment in public expenditure and a renewed emphasis on ‘localism’ by the UK Coalition government (Scott 2010, p. 182).

As the definition of active citizenship in education is being reworked, so are the spaces of its practice. Increasingly, states, school districts and even individual schools have become sites of experimentation where innovations in educational policy are tested. Competition, whether fostered by Federal programs such as Race to the Top or private foundation grants, has intensified the degree to which local instances of school reform act as synecdoche for the movement as a whole. In particular, successful projects carried out by individual schools or districts are assumed to be generalizable across a range of broadly similar situations. At the same time that the accommodation of a diverse network of public and private interests within education reform is bringing policy conceived at larger political and ideological scales to bear at the most local levels of education, the results of these individual projects are speaking back to the knowledge and funding apparatuses that sustain them.

Brenner and Theodore (2002a) note that localities have experienced a resurgence in attention from policymakers moderating influences against the upheaval of previously

established and naturalized scales of governance. As a political space, the “local” – variously conceived as cities, schools, families, or even individuals – is being reconstituted as a site capable of reconciling the contradictions of the larger political economy with emancipatory projects of participatory democracy. As Smith (2010) argues in the context of community development, by investing resources in spatially limited contexts, funding networks enhance opportunities for local empowerment while – intentionally or not – obscuring broader connections between educational achievement and large-scale phenomena such as economic restructuring, processes of impoverishment, or structural racism.

At the same time, by multiplying the number of individual manifestations of school reform and tailoring projects to the unique characteristics of schools, districts, and communities, these networks increase the opportunities for testing innovations in neoliberal policy through what Brenner and Theodore (2002a) call a “trial and error” process. Within this process, the failures of some schools and districts to increase the quality of education play an equally important role as successful schools in the evolution of neoliberal ideology as a whole. The question of what happens to these failures when nonprofit and philanthropic efforts reach the end of their funding cycles, though, is more complex. The contrasting cases of Cleveland High School and Tyee High School that I take up later demonstrates how changing priorities from funding organizations and the political circumstances of external support intersect with local efforts to maintain quality at a struggling institution. As interviews with administrators reveal, constantly shifting political priorities among participants in school reform efforts complicate the transfer of policy from one site to another while simultaneously leading to uneven results across sites. As Peck *et al.* (2010) suggest, this unevenness is not an inherent weakness of neoliberalism nor does it suggest that its eventual dominance is inevitable and all-

encompassing. Rather, unevenness is a *virtue* within neoliberal governance by acting as a mechanism to learn from mistakes and reproducing only the most successful elements of policy while discarding its failures. Indeed, the process of transferring neoliberal policy from one site to another is itself highly unstable and depends on the intricacies of the personal and professional networks of actors involved in particular reform efforts (Peck and Tickell 2010). In the case of education reform, relationships between administrators, agents of granting foundations, individual parents, and other community members lead to widely different outcomes across space. This is demonstrated in the cases of Cleveland and Tyee High Schools; in the former, the rather successful results of a district-wide policy of creating small learning academies within the larger school were nevertheless discarded due in large part to administrative attrition. At Tyee, in a neighboring school district, different funding strategies and a more diverse network of actors have helped maintain the small learning academy model to this day. These different outcomes in both locations can be attributed, I argue, to the focusing of forces from a variety of scales into a highly specific local politics of place. Even as the neoliberal project continues apace, it appears to be doing so in a highly localized and contingent manner, complicating efforts to characterize it as either a top-down or bottom-up process of political economic change. Nevertheless, the effects of choice-based education reform are having widely uneven impacts across space, benefiting some places while further marginalizing already struggling districts and schools.

#### **IV. Seattle education in context**

Despite being the largest city in the Pacific Northwest, Seattle's school district, Seattle Public Schools (SPS) only serves about 45,800 students ([www.seattleschools.org](http://www.seattleschools.org)), placing it

slightly under Portland, OR in terms of enrollment and off the list of the 100 largest school districts in the United States (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/100largest0809>; accessed 9 April 2011). Its relatively low school enrollment for its size can be attributed in part to a significant out-migration of families with school-age children since the 1970s, when district enrollment was over 70,000 (Shaw 2008a). It is also a district heavily segregated by race. This situation is especially poignant given Seattle's status as the first large school district in the country to use busing for racial integration without a court order; although busing ended in 1997, a racial tiebreaker remained in place as a means of assigning priority to students choosing to attend a school outside of their geographic assignment zone (Shaw 2008a). In 2007 a group known as Parents Involved in Community Schools challenged the tiebreaker as part of a class action suit that included a challenge against busing practices in Nashville, TN. After several state and Federal courts upheld the measure, a 5-4 majority of the U.S. Supreme Court finally overturned it (Legal Information Institute 2007). As a result, many of the district's schools that whose racial compositions were once more balanced are resegregating, with some elementary schools exceeding nonwhite enrollments of 90% (Shaw 2008a).

The demographic profile of Seattle Public Schools notwithstanding, the district's priorities now lie in the realm of promoting "excellence." The district's direction over the past two decades resembles in many ways the efforts of many urban school districts to respond to the rising tide of public sentiment concerning the "failure" of public schools to adequately educate children for the demands of a technology-intensive, globalizing economy. Beginning with the recruitment of retired Major General John Stanford in 1995 to head Seattle Public Schools, the district has been attempting to infuse its public schooling practices with strategies imported from outside the sector. In these attempts the district is operating in a somewhat

unique environment: Washington State law does not permit charter schools to be established. Consequently, forms of innovation that inform SPS's initiatives must be adapted to this local circumstance and implemented within the existing school system.

Indeed, its current strategic plan, entitled *Excellence for All*, makes heavy use of language promoting accountability, student performance, and family involvement as tools for improving the quality of Seattle's public education system. Although the plan will be examined in more detail later, it lies within the context of a broad ideological shift regarding the goals of public education: from a vision of education for working through and with multicultural difference to arrive at a coherent body politic, today normative ideas of education privilege the teaching of skills that will allow students to strategically take their place in a globalized world of information technology and international economic competition (Mitchell 2003). Then-superintendent Maria Goodloe-Johnson tacitly recognized this trend as the official policy of Seattle Public Schools in 2008 when she stated that quality education "trumps diversity" as a goal of education policy (Shaw 2008b). As a result, the district's recent open enrollment policy nominally assigns students to their neighborhood schools but provides an option for "School Choice Assignment" that allows students to choose from a range of specialized programs in schools city-wide. As will be discussed later, these programs are inscribed in a politics of parental aspiration that rewards those families that are most successful at navigating the district bureaucracy to choose programs of curricular excellence – themselves unevenly distributed amongst the city's schools – for their children.

Notably, nowhere in *Excellence for All* are structural forces discussed as factors contributing to the wide disparity between individual schools' performance on standardized tests. However, the document situates Seattle Public School's strategy in the face of a heavily

uneven geography of achievement. Since large-scale education reform efforts began in Seattle in the 1990s, the city's approach has been piecemeal in contrast to cities such as New York or San Diego where reform has been sweeping and sudden. While responding to the impetus to competitively capture lines of education innovation capital – both financial and human – Seattle's implementation of school reform efforts has been shaped by the realities of its local political and cultural contexts. In particular, an initiative to create small learning academies within existing schools that dominated education policy for a short time in the early 2000s demonstrates the intersection of the district's approach to education reform with the analytical categories of this work. The rise and ebb of enthusiasm for the initiative, which will be discussed over the course of the following three chapters, is inscribed not only in the district's attempts to engage parents and students as active, engaged partners in the reform of education, but also its embeddedness in a network of advocacy and philanthropic organizations that exercises influence over its direction.

In Seattle, an aspirational politics of education that has been most strongly expressed over the past decade has been expressed through two separate but related initiatives: an open enrollment plan allowing for greater mobility and choice for students across the district, and a “small schools” initiative in which the high schools were to be broken into semi-autonomous units known variously as “learning communities” or “academies.” Because Washington State law does not permit the establishment of charter schools, these measures have provided alternatives to typical charter school offerings: more rigorous coursework, alternative curricula, vocational offerings, and so on. Chronologically, the small schools initiative largely ended and was purged from the district's education planning before the implementation of an open enrollment policy, a process that will be taken up in chapters 2 and 3. However, the legacy of

small learning communities, which was meant to enhance learning options within particular schools remains alongside the open enrollment plan, which promotes choice across the entire district. In theory, students from any part of the Seattle school district may apply to attend any other school in the district, subject to the number of available spots. Across the district, different excellence curricula are unevenly distributed, leading to enrollment pressures upon certain schools while simultaneously causing significant out-migration from individual schools. These curricula include district-specific accelerated learning programs known as “Spectrum” (for elementary school) as well as nationally available programs such as International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP). In addition, a group of elementary, middle, and high schools known as “Option Schools” are uniquely positioned within the open enrollment system. In theory, these schools have no specific geographic recruitment area associated with them and are open to all students in the district, offering alternative curricula including, among others, an integration of arts with a college preparatory instruction (The Center School); intercultural education based on Native American traditions (Pathfinder K-8), and a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) program (Cleveland High School). These “options,” however, are not equally available to all parents who are encouraged to take advantage of them. Although there has been a recent concentration of reform efforts in disadvantaged neighborhoods (for example, SPS’s “Southeast Initiative” that has concentrated reform efforts in the poorer neighborhoods of color in Seattle’s southern regions), unequal access to transportation and parental knowledge of these programs has limited the reach and impact of excellence programs.

All in all, the urban space of the Seattle metropolitan area serves as an interesting case study for examining current trends in education governance. Because Washington state does not allow for the formation of charter schools, some of the wholesale transformations of public

education that have occurred elsewhere (for example, New York, Washington, D.C., and San Diego; see Ravitch 2010a for a discussion of these places) have not come to pass. Choice-based school reform efforts are relatively new and are being continuously reshaped by several local factors: Seattle is a place with a strong tradition of local democracy and citizens' organizations, many of whom have been strongly implicated in reform efforts; the city lies at a nexus of local and international capital and philanthropic networks, notably the Gates Foundation, providing strong links across scale from the local to the global in terms of funding and knowledge transfer for reform projects. Finally, the lack of major coherent reform efforts at the scale of either the state or the city has meant that piecemeal trial-and-error reform efforts have been at the forefront of reform trends. For these reasons, I argue that Seattle provides a unique place to study emerging forms of governance that are transforming not only education but other sectors of social governance as well.

## **V. Methodology**

To conduct my research into the networks that are currently driving school reform in the Seattle metropolitan region, I relied on two main sources of data: first, archival materials from Seattle Public Schools and organizations involved in local and national school reform efforts that include press releases, newspaper articles, and summary reports; second, in-depth semi-structured interviews<sup>3</sup> with administrators, parents, and representatives of funding organizations that have been involved in these efforts. Interviewees were drawn from a non-random snowball sample using personal connections gained as the interview process proceeded to contact persons of potential interest. The number of interviews is limited ( $n = 9$ ) and is not meant to be fully

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<sup>3</sup> For a sample interview script, please see appendices.

representative of the range of interests and actors involved in Seattle-area school reform. Rather, the interviews are meant to illustrate key moments in specific reform efforts that help illustrate the broader theoretical arguments I make throughout this work. In all, I spoke largely with current and former administrators who were active in carrying out reform efforts initiated by either the school district or outside organizations in order to understand the connections that were forged between different actors to drive these efforts forward. These interviews were carried out over a period of roughly 11 months, during a time when rapid changes were occurring in Seattle-area education politics. Despite this, the interviews were mostly aimed at getting background information and trying to capture processes that had taken place over a period of time. They therefore did not, to a significant extent, capture the current moment of school reform. I have transcribed the interviews I carried out as carefully as possible and have tried to faithfully represent the intentions and meanings of my interviewees. Any inaccuracies or misrepresentations are my sole responsibility.

Equally important to the interviewees included in the study are those who were left out; because for this particular work I was interested mainly in the governance networks driving school reform efforts, I did not seek out a representative sampling of parents whose children have been affected by these efforts. The parents I did speak with are active in the political discussions around school reform and represent only a very small proportion of the families whose lives have been effected by school closures, changes to curriculum, and other policy changes over the past twenty or so years. It is likely that many families who have been most affected – those whose children attend the most struggling schools which have been most intensely targeted by reform efforts – do not have the time, resources, or knowledge of the school system to be directly involved in these discussions. Therefore, my study did not sample these

populations, although in follow-up work I will want to draw from a more representative sample to examine the on-the-ground effects of school reform efforts (see Holloway *et al.* 2010 for a discussion of the importance of paying attention to the children and families whose daily lives are touched by school reform). Neither did I seek out students or teachers who are the direct subjects of school reform efforts and who experience the opportunities and difficulties of these efforts. Given these limitations, my work cannot and should not speak to how the experiences of school reform are lived in schools on a daily basis. In my future work I will want to build longer-term relationships with teachers, students, and families in order to best capture their experiences and represent them as accurately as possible, while being fully aware of the impossibility of perfectly reproducing others' opinions as well as the ethical dangers of appropriating the experiences of subaltern groups (who make up a large proportion of the population touched by school reform efforts) and using their words to enhance my own academic career.

## Chapter 1: Reframing Citizenship within Education Reform

### I. Introduction

To fully empower parents, families must not only be provided choices, but also useful, meaningful information about those choices. Just as parents get report cards about their children's performance, parents and the public should also get "report cards" about the comparative performance of local schools and teachers. If schools are transparent about school and teacher effectiveness, then they will have more incentives to keep improving constantly, and parents will be able both to demand better for their children and to determine which school is best for each child. (Students First Policy Priority 2; available <http://www.studentsfirst.org/policy-agenda/entry/empower-parents-with-useful-data>)

The epigraph above reflects the aims of a distinct element of the school reform movement that is marked by a preoccupation with engaging parents and students as active participants in the reformation of public education. This desire to engage reflects not only an ideological evolution within the education reform movement but also an evolution in the way citizenship is situated within contemporary systems of governance. Despite their differing objectives and political commitments, a diverse group of actors in education reform efforts are collectively contributing to a vision of the ideal active citizen as empowered, informed, and motivated. Michael Apple (1999, 2001, 2004) argues presciently that many of the ideological roots of contemporary education reform can be traced to right-leaning pluralist and neoliberal arguments for freedom of choice in education (see also Welner 2011). However, the ideological appeal of school reform policies has broadened greatly by coalescing around a consensus on the principles of active citizenship among groups identifying with political affiliations across the spectrum. Moreover, multiple connections between public and private actors are fostering similarly multiple ways in which active citizenship is articulated at different political scales. Within education reform, government, nonprofit, and philanthropic organizations gather financial and knowledge resources from the global, national, and local networks they are embedded in and offer these resources to people and groups who endeavor to reform the public education system. In doing so, they contribute to a displacement of active citizenship from the ability of individuals or

communities to advocate on their behalf to the state to the ability to strategically articulate their needs so as to make claims on the resources of the private sector.

Marston and Mitchell (2004) advocate a “citizenship formation” approach to understanding citizenship as a “non-static, non-linear social, cultural, political, economic, and legal construction” whose relationship to state power responds to shifts in the underlying political economy and is variegated over time and space. Within the contemporary context of welfare state retrenchment and strategic redeployment, I argue that a particular kind of active citizenship is emerging as a privileged means of engaging in the public sphere. This ideal citizen is one who was initially crafted as a foil to racialized and gendered subjects of state welfare dependency during the 1980s and 90s. Although these subjects still exist in some form today as symbols of failed citizens (see Mitchell 2006), active citizenship is increasingly constructed positively as the capacity to effectively make claims on the state as an individual, family, or community. As Rose (1999) puts it, the ideal citizen of the advanced economies of the West is not simply one who is free, but who is *obligated* to be free by taking steps to fully realize his or her potential as a political subject (87). While innovations in education reform have done much to foster the emergence of this vision of citizenship, they must be examined within the context of a broader shift in normative ways of relating to state power.

This chapter considers how education reform, having emerged in its contemporary manifestation alongside welfare reform in the mid-90s, is remodulating visions of the ideal active citizen. By portraying education as a critical arena of social reproduction in which the state has a responsibility to provide quality and responsive service, education reform networks are offering a model for political participation in the public sphere to parents and families as well as the resources to undertake that participation as empowered, informed parties. This model is one that

is, as Cruikshank (1999) describes it, fundamentally departs from existing pluralist, liberal-democratic, and even radical democratic conceptions of political dispute and engagement. Rather than fostering collective debate to determine the best course of action for a polity's children as a whole, these opportunities are atomizing parents and families and creating a normative aspirational ideal for educational opportunity. However, these processes are difficult to trace back to a single source of power. Rather than oppressively tying people into relations of subjugation to power, contemporary neoliberal forms of governance tend to attempt to simultaneously create and engage peoples' political subjectivities as willing participants in their own self-knowledge and betterment. In the context of education, this has been made possible partly by counterpoising the latent potential of children and families to thrive as careful consumers of education against the stonewalling tendencies of the current school system. More broadly, the education reform movement has been successful in framing responsible parenting, as Painter and Philo (1995) put it, at the intersection of citizenship as membership in a polity and citizenship as socio-cultural belonging. Through opportunities afforded by the school reform network, parents and families are called to seek out the very best educational opportunities for their children both as a way to exercise their rights as taxpayers and to validate their presence as legitimate citizens. In the process, parents who are unable or unwilling to participate in this model of responsible citizenship have been cast as abject by the school system. In addition, the involvement of the public sphere in determining education policy has been discredited in favor of bringing in the outside expertise and funding of the nonprofit sector, particularly philanthropic capital, which is held in many cases as the way forward for education.

## **II. Articulating a crisis of governance through dependency and empowerment**

Originating in the wider dismantling of the systems of state-sponsored welfare that had underpinned the American social contract since the Great Depression, the twin notions of “dependency” and “empowerment” are embedded as well within the development of education reform. In their ideological and discursive manifestations, these norms of active citizenship situate parents and their children as political subjects of choice within education governance. Their deployment casts the exercising of educational choice in terms of both negative and positive power: in the first case, choice is a means of freeing one’s children, family, and community from being at the whim of public school districts that can not or will not respond to the real dangers posed by educational underachievement; in the second case, choice becomes a means of actively articulating one’s needs to networks that can provide the resources needed to create educational infrastructure appropriate to particular children, families, and communities. In this way market-based education reform proposals fit neatly into the twin discourses of dependency and empowerment established by the period of welfare reform.

The notion of “dependency” was most infamously deployed during the dismantling of the American welfare state during the 1980s and 1990s as a means of delegitimizing welfare recipients’ claims to government support. Fraser and Gordon (1994) trace the evolution of the meaning of “dependency” over time and conclude that in a period of postindustrial capitalism when the possibility of participation in the public sphere of the state has been at least formally extended to all citizens, dependency has been cast as an abject state of disconnection with society. “Dependency” is located firmly as a personal deficit limited to the individual’s private life, denying him or her membership as a full citizen of the state. The structural origin of dependent groups and people has been obscured as well. As O’Connor (2000) argues, an

increasing sophistication of scientific knowledge about the category of “the poor” led to the displacement of causes of poverty from the limitations of the economic system to the deficiencies of the individual. Instead of an inevitable consequence of the capitalist political economy, poverty was recast as a temporary disconnection from the labor and consumption cycles of the market whose prevalence could be predicted among individuals and families based on a calculus of “risk factors.” Coupled with a turn to governments of the Right throughout the English-speaking West in the 1980s, these risk factors were mutated through popular political discourse into racialized (usually black) and feminized (i.e. as single mothers) deficits (Fraser and Gordon 1994, Schram 2000, Cannella 2003). By deploying these archetypes – such as the “welfare queen” favored by the American Republican party through the 1980s and 90s – as undeserving beneficiaries of taxpayers’ hard-earned money, welfare dependency was successfully articulated<sup>4</sup> by the Right into an ideological attack on the poor and the government decadence that supported them (Piven 2002; Hall 1988).

However, by the mid-‘90s discourses surrounding welfare reform had sufficiently broadened to be taken up by the “Third Way” center-left governments of Bill Clinton in the U.S. and Tony Blair in the U.K. This occurred as the ideological potency of dependency was augmented by a discourse of empowerment that emphasized reconnecting people to the market by instrumentalizing their initiative and self-esteem as active participants in their own improvement (Cruikshank 1999). A particularly powerful example of this thinking came in the form of “workfare” policies that tied welfare receipt to employment or actively seeking employment and that formed the core of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. At a stroke, the state was divested of responsibility for creating work (or, in the absence of

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<sup>4</sup> The recent influence of the Tea Party in the United States upon Congressional elections shows that while specific elements of the anti-welfare rhetoric have shifted, the underlying ideological assault upon beneficiaries of the state remains very strong indeed as of 2011.

work, basic security) while individuals became responsible for becoming *workers* (Peck 2001, 6). By privileging labor as a means of reconciling oneself to the market, the causes of poverty were depoliticized.

Additionally, implicit in the discourse of workfare was the notion that the existence of people who remained dependent on government payments pointed to a crisis of the overall system; by providing open-ended financial support, it had fostered dependency and strayed from the more efficient role of encouraging people to engage with the rehabilitative capabilities of the market rather than providing direct transfers of wealth. While the drastic reductions to Federal welfare programs through mechanisms such as workfare were and continue to be massively contested (e.g. McPhee 2002; Boyer 2006; Newman 2011), the promises of empowerment through active citizenship embedded in these policies allowed them to ascend to a fundamental consensus on the proper role of the state in providing a circumscribed social safety net among liberal and conservative policymakers.

As in the case of welfare, education reform evolved from a heavily partisan attack on the deadening impact of state-managed social governance to emphasize a more positive vision of personal empowerment as a path to self-sufficiency while cautioning against the tendencies of government-managed public education to revert into dependency-fostering practices. In particular, by pointing to successful already-existing measures, such as magnet schools, that had been designed specifically for redistributive purposes (such as promoting racial integration), school choice proponents worked to demonstrate that choice could have a beneficial impact on outcomes of equity (Henig 1994). Early market-based school reform ideas had been expressed most notably by Milton Friedman in the form of government-funded vouchers redeemable for educational services at the public or private school of a parent's choice in chapter of his 1962

manifesto *Capitalism and Freedom*. Despite the support of then-President Ronald Reagan, though, vouchers proved to be too politically volatile to gain widespread popularity.

However, with the 1983 publication of the President's National Commission on Excellence in Education's report *A Nation at Risk*, the purported complicity of the American public school system in entrenched patterns of domestic poverty and America's declining economic competitiveness in a globalizing economy came to the American consciousness. The notion that public schools are failing to properly educate the nation's children is not new in American society (e.g. Wineburg 2001, Zimmerman 2005). With the publication of the report, though, the idea that poor school performance is a looming threat that demands swift action on the part of educators and parents was cemented in the American public's mind (Ginsberg and Lyche 2008; Ravitch 2010). Over time, the relationship between the public school system and the parents and children it serves has been articulated variously as one characterized by moments of dependency as well as empowerment.

The notion of choice as it is expressed by the school reform movement has multiple meanings, but a core meaning is tied closely to parents' articulation of their claims on the state and its promise of quality public education. As Wilkins (2010) argues, the extent to which parents see themselves as consumers leaches into their notion of themselves as citizens who realize their participation in the public sphere on the basis of their capacity to choose the best opportunities for their children. Rose (1999) echoes this in the context of the larger state in arguing that under contemporary governance the realm of political discourse

no longer phrases itself in the language of obligation, duty, and social citizenship. It now justifies itself by arguing over the political forms that are adequate to the existence of persons as essentially, naturally, creatures striving to actualize themselves in their everyday, secular lives. Within such rationalities, it appears that individuals can best fulfill their political obligations in relation to the wealth, health, and happiness of the nation not when they are bound into relations of dependency and obligation, but when they seek to *fulfill themselves* as free individuals (1999, 166; emphasis in the original)

As legitimate citizenship becomes increasingly tied to the obligations of minimizing dependency and maximizing empowerment, its opposite – illegitimate citizenship – lies in relationships that fail to keep up with the demands of the contemporary political economy. Writing about the transition to leaner systems of welfare provision, Evan Watkins (1993) locates the discursive power of empowerment in what he terms “technoideological” language. Because poverty is assumed to be a temporary state of deprivation, taking action to work towards self-sufficiency is coded as “innovation,” while remaining in a state of dependency is cast as “obsolescence.” Similarly, by this logic, the failure of the public education system to adequately educate students is a problem to be struggled against by embracing innovative ways of governing education and leaving behind obsolete forms of bureaucracy. Structural and historical explanations for underachieving students, such as the legacy of school segregation, entrenched poverty, and the lack of access of the highest quality schools to students of color, melt away as innovation is proposed as the solution to the problems of the present moment.

Indeed, counterpoised to parents’ agency as responsible choosers is the public school system itself, whose bureaucratic inertia and vested interests present themselves as roadblocks to be overcome by parental initiative. In large part the obstructionist tendencies of school districts are located within teachers’ unions, whose vested interests are seen as explicitly blocking efforts at innovations in making teacher labor, evaluation, and professionalization standards more flexible in the interest of improving education for all children (e.g. Moe 2011, 2006). By protecting teachers who chronically fail to provide quality instruction, unions are accused of fostering dependent relationships between the caprices of school districts and students who have no choice but to attend their failing neighborhood school. In an analysis of media portrayals of teachers’ unions from *The New York Times* and *Time Magazine* between 2001 and 2008,

Goldstein (2011) found that the majority of discourse surrounding educators' organized labor during that period was negative. In extreme cases – especially in visual advertisements purchased by choice-based organizations, teachers' unions were referred to as “bullies,” supporting the “worst” teachers, or being “obstructionist.” Elsewhere, in-depth articles analyzed in Goldstein's study gave a more nuanced view of teachers and their unions, in which

their evaluation (within the article) was contingent on their reported actions as a collective or as individual teachers. In other words, the national teachers' unions, individual local unions, and individual teachers were presented positively when and if they showed willingness to consider and accept popular school reform initiatives (553).

Rather than a purely partisan attack on the concept of unions themselves,<sup>5</sup> public evaluations of teachers' unions are tied to their willingness to innovate along with the rest of the reform movement. This contingent view of teachers and their labor organizations was especially apparent during negotiations between Seattle Public Schools (SPS) and its teacher union in 2009, the Seattle Education Association (SEA). A group called the Communities and Parents for Public Schools in Seattle (CPPS; more below) appealed to then-Superintendent Maria Goodloe-Johnson to propose revising the contract to allow for “teacher effectiveness” to be included as a criterion for layoff decisions.<sup>6</sup> During a subsequent round of negotiations in fall 2010, another Seattle-area education advocacy group, the Our Schools Coalition, released a list of proposed changes to the SPS-SEA contract and levels of support collected by poll for each proposed measure, with respondent groups broken into the categories “teachers,” “parents,” and “taxpayers.” (available: <http://www.ourschoolscoalition.org>). “Taxpayers” were defined as “randomly selected voters within the Seattle Public School District who do not have children attending Seattle Public Schools.” Although questions could be raised about the level of concern of this last group for the

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<sup>5</sup> Although as recent events in several states, especially Wisconsin, have shown, there is a growing knee-jerk reaction among American conservatives against the very *concept* of labor organizing among public employees.

<sup>6</sup> Available: <http://www.cppsforseattle.org/News/Aug09/07-28-09letter.html>

state of public education, it was nevertheless used to imply a natural convergence of interest between “good” parents and responsible, contributing members of society. Notably, three questions <sup>7</sup> showed significant differences in support among the three categories, implying a gulf between teachers on one side and parents and taxpayers on the other:

5. Student academic growth should be used as a significant factor in teacher evaluations. (The actual survey instrument we used the word “primary” instead of “significant” so the following polling numbers are a conservative estimate -- **polling shows 66% of taxpayers, 59% of parents and 21% of teachers agree.**)

6. Teacher performance, as opposed to seniority, should be a significant factor in staffing decisions, including placement, transfers and layoffs. **(Polling shows 83% of taxpayers, 79% of parents and 40% of teachers agree.)**

7. Currently, the process to remove ineffective teachers can take 18 months or longer. Instead, the lowest performing teachers should be removed in less than 12 months. **(Polling shows 82% of taxpayers, 82% of parents and 63% of teachers agree.)** (Available: <http://www.ourschoolscoalition.org>; all bold in original)

A clear message emerges from the published responses to these proposals: Teachers’ interests in decisions of education governance are clearly different from those of two constituent groups who clearly support measures to increase innovation in public education: parents and taxpayers. By supporting measures designed to enforce greater accountability and responsibility among teachers, parents who hold high measures of aspiration for their children’s education are suggested to be synonymous with productive, taxpaying citizens. Their support for measures intended to subject teachers to greater scrutiny is cast as a contribution to the struggle against the obsolete bureaucracy of teachers’ unions and school districts themselves. In addition, parents who do not share these views are implicitly suggested to be uninterested in achieving a higher quality of education for their children. In effect, parents are boxed into a limited set of possibilities for their identification as parents – by supporting teachers against measures for accountability and evaluation, they are assumed to not hold their children’s interests at heart and so become cast as the abject non-citizen parent.

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<sup>7</sup> The full survey results and methodology are available at [http://www.ourschoolscoalition.org/documents/Our\\_Schools\\_polling\\_summary.pdf](http://www.ourschoolscoalition.org/documents/Our_Schools_polling_summary.pdf)

Indeed, one of the innovations that lie at the heart of school reform efforts across the political spectrum has been to mobilize grassroots reform opportunities and resources for parents gathered from a diverse network of public and private actors. One way in which this has occurred has been to suggest that although they can be the primary motivators for positive change in their children's education, parents are nevertheless precariously situated and need constant guidance and self-governance to succeed in their advocacy. While the failure of schools to adequately educate American children is uncontested, these failures have become infamous and gained cultural currency beyond the individual failings of schools and districts. They are, in fact, magnified to the scale of the nation and have been consistently been ambiguously located with students and their families. Thomas Popkewitz (2003, 2007) argues, for instance, that parents are discursively responsabilized – “pedagogized” (2003, 53) – by contrasting two portrayals of a family's participation in its children's educational choices: first, the cosmopolitan, concerned parent who takes an active and informed role in matching his or her child's needs and aptitudes with an appropriate educational context; second, a parent who is unable or unwilling to take the initiative to maximize his or her child's educational opportunities and so is cast as an “abject” figure who is meant to be left behind. In policy terms, this manifests itself in the deployment of what Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2011) term an “aspirational politics” that has encouraged policies that situate parents as consumers of education (see also Minow 2010). More particularly, they argue, in the context of Blair's New Labour government in England during the late 90s and early 00s, there has emerged

a model of expectational citizenship, where the welfare-state is seen as a provider, to aspirational citizenship, where the state is instead seen as an enabler or facilitator. In these aspirational politics, the policy focus is no longer society, rather the aim is to change individual actors so that they might better perform their responsibilities as future citizen-workers (82).

While parents are expected to choose the best possible educational opportunities for their children, however, they are frequently presented with a highly uneven landscape of options that are not distributed evenly either in terms of their geographic placement or in terms of bureaucratic access. Nevertheless, parental aspirations are assumed to exist within an isotropic plane in which all options are equally within the reach of all parents who truly care about their children's education. Indeed, the efforts of parents to intervene in the reformation of public education is commonly understood as a collective, community-based effort based on common-sense aspirations for the academic well-being of their children. This understanding, expressed through parent-teacher associations, education reform advocacy organizations, and citizen groups, increasingly aligns parental aspirations their children's educational achievement with the principles of active, non-dependent citizenship as articulated by welfare reform advocates. In Seattle, a bewildering array of such groups comprises a diverse set of parents' aspirations and their claims upon the school district. Uniting these claims in recent years has been an effort to demand greater accountability on the part of teachers and a more active voice for parents in school governance decisions. One such group, called Communities and Parents for Public Schools of Seattle (CPPS)<sup>8</sup> articulates its mission as follows:

Our parents bring all types of professional expertise to the table. More importantly, there is no better group to advocate on behalf of the children of the city than concerned parents. A parent or even single school community on their own is powerless to make district-wide changes - they are too often met with distrust, and schools and communities are often pitted against each other. But together, we are a political force and catalyst for change. Inside and outside of schools, parent involvement is essential to student success. CPPS captures the passion and energy from parents across the district and channels it into constructive, district-wide improvement. (available: [http://www.cppsofseattle.org/about\\_us.html](http://www.cppsofseattle.org/about_us.html); emphasis in the original)

Organizations such as CPPS present their claims in the form of an underlying assumption that parental aspiration exists *a priori* and simply needs to be harnessed though coordination in order to bring about change. As Purcell (2011) points out in the context of "academy" [i.e.

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<sup>8</sup> CPPS is a local chapter of a national organization called Parents for Public Schools (<http://www.parents4publicschools.com/>)

charter] schools in the UK, the promotion of excellence curricula at the local level draws upon and adapts national-level discourse to place widely understood problems in public education within a particular context. In particular, the notion that parental aspiration is naturally present or absent within particular places tends to be pervasive in the language of not only policymakers but also educators themselves. In effect, public awareness of the wide disparities between the quality of public schools at the national level is condensed to the local scale, with certain areas singled out for special intervention in order to create parental initiative and aspiration where it purportedly does not already exist.

This is reflected in the uneven development of geographies of school reform within particular districts. Although parental choice is a compelling impetus to action in an abstract sense, it sometimes proves elusive. In many communities, In Seattle, highly segregated immigrant enclaves mean that the “passion and energy” of parents is not simply waiting as a formless mass to be channeled into reform efforts as the above mission statement might suggest. In individual schools located in poor- and immigrant heavy neighborhoods where parents have limited time and limited linguistic capacity to engage with processes of community input into reform efforts, plans elaborated at larger scales risk failure. South of Seattle, a diverse community encompassing a large range of socioeconomic conditions is grouped within the Highline School District. There a former school administrator spoke of the challenges faced in implementing the district’s small school policy:

We also did take into account that we worked with a group [of parents and students] that was not enfranchised. So we were aware that the people we served did not have a social service structure around them, so there were no social service agencies back then, no health care, there were no community groups or leaders. So we were aware of that context... (Former Highline district educator, personal interview)

Interestingly, in the Highline district small schools initiative has proven more successful and sustainable than in Seattle. Contrary to Seattle schools, students at the school discussed above continue to attend classes in one of four themed learning academies. Some reasons for this

uneven geography of reform will be discussed further in Chapters 2 and 3. In terms of parental buy-in, however, one reason for the greater success of the program was the effort that went into creating parental consensus around the concept of small learning academies. As the administrator explained, however, parental buy-in was an essential element of the reform process that could not be taken for granted given the “disenfranchised” nature of the largely immigrant population of the community. Where parental aspiration for the idea of small learning academies did not already exist in had to be drawn out. This is not to say that creating consensus involved coercion or ulterior motives – on the contrary, as the administrator went on to describe, the process was explicitly aimed at meeting the needs of the community it was serving:

We had a really aggressive – not only community buy-in, but community design approach. So we did a number of large meetings, where there was enough fear that people came out, so we did two or three large meetings, where we asked people questions like, “What of [school], as we redesign, what do you want to make sure we keep, what would you encourage that we jettison, what do you think your kids need, and what do you think your neighbors’ kids need”... So we did a number of meetings like that and got a lot of data back from the community, which was helpful for us, not just for designing, but for buy-in...I also did meetings in some of the public housing areas, so there’s one great story of one of our social workers got me set up to meet with, I don’t know if it was public housing, but it was Section 8 housing, almost all Somalis, and I went and met with about 8 Somali women, and it was very powerful, and through that I convinced them, they hadn’t been coming to the public meetings, so I convinced them, “now that I’ve come to you, we need your voice at the table,” and they walked in force in the next big public meeting, which was pretty cool. (Personal interview, former Highline district educator, 4/23/2011).

Based upon educators’ expectations, engaged citizens; poverty, immigrant status, and education level in this case are reflexively – though not at all cynically – associated with a kind of disenfranchisement that prevents them from fulfilling their potential as aspirational parents. Returning to the Seattle school district, identifying and codifying parental aspirations was considered vital to the success of the small-school reform projects. As a SPS administrator and former educator put it when speaking of community engagement efforts related to the district’s small schools initiative:

Written into our small learning communities grant were explicit dollars to engage families and communities in the conversation about school reform...I think it’s absolutely necessary. I think one of the biggest things that – and this isn’t so much to the community question, but one of the big things that schools miss when they undertake this information – and this is a generalization, because not all schools

miss this – is the fact that this [outreach to parents and families] is super hard work, and I think they know it's hard work, but what they often do is go to the mechanical [i.e. changes to infrastructure or schedule] changes and overlook the philosophical and the values work that needs to be done before any real change can happen if it is to be lasting...if you don't have a commitment that goes beyond the mechanical or beyond the research, then it's likely to fail (personal interview, 3/29/2011).

Identifying and incorporating the desires of parents and families to school reform initiatives in this case was considered vital to legitimating projects in both ethical as well as practical senses.

Indeed, beyond the efforts of educators and public officials an entire industry has sprung up not only to harness and channel parental energy into school reform but also foster aspiration where it is seen to be lacking. As the next section details, this industry represents a radical hybridization of public efforts and private resources towards a particular choice-based politics of education reform. In doing so, the meaning of the “public” within public education has been radically remade and expanded to fundamentally reshape our understanding of the relationship between the state and the social goods it purports to provide.

### **III. School choice, the nonprofit sector, and the reshaping of the public sphere**

Arguments for school choice have modulated the rhetorics of dependency and empowerment by presenting the problem of school governance as a matter of how the public sphere itself should be interpreted. Advocates for choice-based education (e.g. Merrifield 2001; Bridghouse 2000; Hill 2002) take recourse to pluralist arguments that public resources should be available for the benefit of private initiatives and suggest on these grounds that arguments against school choice policies that question the legitimacy of private efforts in the provision of a public good are largely irrelevant. This view, however, is not limited to right-wing defenders of school choice; indeed, the turn to “Third Way” or neoliberal policies on the part of the Democratic and Labour Parties in the U.S. and Britain have helped normalize the idea that the public sphere should be mobilized for the betterment of society as a whole by opening its

resources to individuals and groups working in their own interest (Rose 2000; Kearns 1992). Similarly, networks of nonprofit and philanthropic organizations are working upon a latent discourse of empowerment through school choice to offer resources with which the public education system can be remade.

Under neoliberal regimes, the hybridization of the public and private sectors has fostered a new set of political spaces within which practices and meanings of social governance are being reworked. As avenues for making claims upon state resources are displaced from the direct action of traditional social movements to the nonprofit or voluntary sector the roles of actors within structures of social governance have themselves become hybrid. In particular, successful advocacy on behalf of social movements requires acumen in building strategic partnerships among public and private organizations; political activists are increasingly becoming a corps of professionals whose role is to utilize private resources to create a more equitable distribution of public goods (Katz 2005; Larner and Craig 2005). As Morison (2000) argues, the nonprofit<sup>9</sup> sector is discursively normalized as “the only possible solution to a range of problems...which are outside the reach of state bureaucracy and beyond the interests of the private sector.” This “third” sector becomes, in essence, a political space where freedom from state dependence and empowerment via the resources of the private sector are negotiated. Although politically distinct from both the state and the market, it becomes a site whose meaning and role is contested through the participation of both public and private interests.

In response to the purported crises of governance precipitating welfare dependency and failed public education systems alike, nonprofit intervention is advanced as a means of creating an alternate political sphere within which these crises can be resolved (Ilcan and Basok 2004).

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<sup>9</sup> I exclusively use the American term “nonprofit” throughout the rest of this chapter and the rest of the work.

As Fyfe and Milligan (2003) argue in the context of the nonprofit sector in Glasgow, however, the codification of social movements within nonprofit advocacy is not a straightforward ascension of marginalized groups' claims upon the state to official status. Rather, these claims become subject to redefinition according to the relationships of power between and among the organizations of the nonprofit sector itself. In particular, the presence of corporate philanthropy in social service provision represents a critical density of capacity both for making knowledge about social problems and for providing resources to address these problems through public policy.

Within education in particular, philanthropic interests have increasingly served as nodal points for tying together parent advocates, nonprofit organizations, school districts, and the Federal government since the early 1990s, when school reform was reframed from creating a private alternative for the public education system to creatively reshaping public education itself. As Koch (2011) documents, corporate philanthropy has been instrumental in creating networks for fostering innovation within public education. For example, The NewSchools Venture Fund, financed by a "who's who" of American philanthropic organizations based on recognizable brands such as Wal-Mart, The Gap, and Microsoft, has in turn financed the creation of policy innovation and charter school networks including Uncommon Schools and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP). These networks have become heavily implicated in hybridized education governance at the highest levels: in particular, the Federal government has become increasingly invested in promoting education entrepreneurship with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan enthusiastically throwing his support behind philanthropic innovators (Welner 2011).

The influence wielded by corporate philanthropy at the level of Federal education policy notwithstanding, however, it is perhaps in its support of more local advocacy organizations that

the hybridizing influence of the nonprofit sector is most acutely felt. Within the Seattle education reform community, for instance, the local presence of the Gates Foundation leads it to figure heavily in choice advocacy organizations' sources of support. As local public school advocate and activist puts it polemically, "following the money" reveals an apparent pattern of links between the Foundation and organizations whose advocacy efforts align with its choice-based priorities (personal interview, 3/11/2011). To be sure, the nature of the role of foundations in public policy is highly contested. For example, Roelofs (2003) traces the development of American philanthropy through time and concludes that it has largely functioned as a hedge against impulses for radical change by channeling progressive efforts in ways that are sanctioned by the priorities of an economic and political élite.

However, evidence points to a more ambivalent set of priorities that are not easily reducible to the maintenance of hegemonic power relationships. My conversation with a program officer at the Gates Foundation <sup>10</sup> reveals a narrative that complicates any simple top-down characterization of the relationship between the Foundation and its grantee organizations (personal interview, 4/15/2011). At the same time, the Foundation's practices as a philanthropic organization are illustrative of the way in which the politics of social service provision are being shifted into a hybrid sphere of active citizenship. According to the program officer, philanthropy in general and the Gates Foundation in particular is "changing its view of social change" and its role in bringing it about. In particular, the Foundation sees its role as "empowering local organizations," practicing a "strategic philanthropy...that play[s] a catalytic role" in facilitating nonprofit organizations' and school districts' reform aspirations. Nevertheless, the Gates Foundation retains a set of "strategic priorities" that inform its interactions with these

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<sup>10</sup> When meeting with the informant I decided spontaneously to not record the conversation in order to create a relaxed atmosphere within which an open conversation could take place. What follows is paraphrases based on notes I took; all quotations are terms and phrases used by my informant recorded verbatim by me from our dialog.

organizations. In particular, when offering a grant to a particular organization the Foundation works to “coordinate [those] strategic priorities and [the] empowerment” of the grantee organization. Crucial to this, as explained by the program officer, is “being transparent about what partnering means” in terms of clearly communicating a set of funding criteria that will have to be fulfilled by the grantee organization. In vetting potential grantee organizations, the Foundation puts the following question to applicants: “how do our priorities align with yours or those of your context?” The latter part of this question is meant to call attention to the organization’s relationships with other local advocacy groups as well as the school district(s) in which they operate and tailor grant programs to the political realities of those relationships.

By this account, the Gates Foundation is committed to creating context-sensitive relationships with organizations that will endow them with the resources to act upon local educational priorities. In practice the Foundation funds a wide variety of public and private organizations ranging from school districts to charter school networks to advocacy organizations; the details of some of these different funding cases will be taken up in later chapters. More broadly, the Foundation’s granting processes privilege – as a matter of course – modes of empowerment that advance its investment priorities. However, it is incontestable that the Gates Foundations’ priorities, while inscribed in the bounds of corporate capital, are progressive in that they aim at least in theory to address inequality in education and expand opportunities to disadvantaged groups. Their efforts can be contrasted with those of, for example, the Charles Koch Foundation, whose efforts include sponsoring professorships in universities for researchers who are committed to the unabashedly conservative agenda of “the study of economic freedom and how it advances society’s well-being” (available: <http://www.charleskochfoundation.org/giving/higher-education/>). Although most if not all

corporate philanthropy conforms to the interests of its parent companies' strategies for capital accumulation, there is no doubt that not all corporate philanthropy can be reduced to a simplistic class analysis of corporate interests in conflict with the interests of communities.

However, while the Gates Foundation's resources help a range of public and private organizations offer genuine opportunities to participate in education reform, these opportunities are necessarily circumscribed according to the terms of the relationships between the Foundation and its grantees. Crucially, the avenues of engagement with the public arena of state-sponsored education are modulated by nonpublic interests; while the granting organization does not maintain complete control over the ways in which citizens' empowerment is manifested in individual instances of school reform projects, it presents a normative mode of engagement that is highly influential as a model for aspiring participants. Potential grantees are encouraged, either explicitly or tacitly, to tailor their grant applications to a set of funding priorities that reflect the interests of granting agencies or their sources of capital at any given time. These interests are increasingly privileging the creation of governance networks that transcend the spheres of public and private and whose members lie within both sectors yet whose relationships constitute a new arena within which policy is forged and carried out.

Also integral to the Gates Foundation's and other corporate foundations' role in reshaping the political terrain of the nonprofit sector is the way in which it discursively portrays the public school system as both a collaborative and antagonistic element in creating the "systems change" (personal interview, 4/15/2011) necessary to reach its student achievement goals. In doing so it both moves beyond and yet remains rooted in dichotomous narratives of dependency and empowerment as applied to government-sponsored social service provision. My informant described the Gates Foundation's characterization of public school systems as

necessarily “large, bureaucratic, hard-to-move systems” that require a two-pronged approach to augment their ability to meet student needs and raise achievement: on the one hand, the Foundation is interested in creating examples of innovation *outside* the public school system mainly in the form of charter schools. Indeed, my informant described charter schools as a “R&D” arena whose freedom from typical education regulations could inspire change within traditional public school districts. On the other hand, the Gates Foundation remains committed to “work[ing] slowly over time to improve things” *inside* the public school system. This view foregrounds the possibility that avenues for empowerment may well be found within the public education system; at the same time, it locates innovation at least partially within the private sector’s ability to innovate in opposition to government’s endemic inertia. By targeting these two approaches simultaneously, Gates and other foundations create avenues for intervention in the public school system that link the public and private sectors in multiple ways and suggest that the best possible solutions are those that draw on the best of both worlds.

#### **IV. Towards a different understanding of the “public” sphere**

By marshaling their considerable private sector resources for the benefit of education as a public good, foundations are changing the way in which educators and parents think about progress in the public school system. Innovation for the benefit of all within this discourse is *necessarily* predicated upon the intervention of private capital; while grassroots movements still play an important role in advocating for reform within public education, they are much more likely to draw upon the resources of the private sector for the means of organization and mobilization. These resources, however well intentioned, are not unconditional; linkages are made between foundation capital and local groups on the basis of an alignment of interests and

goals. In effect, this has resulted in a set of contested claims to the authenticity of the grassroots itself, with conflict arising among advocacy groups as to who can legitimately claim to speak on behalf of the “people.” As cases such as the Our Schools Coalition demonstrate, a powerful claim can be made on the basis of identifying with groups of people whose credentials of “active” participation in the public sphere are unquestionable. A similarly strong claim can be made by those who claim to be acting against the documented inability of government-managed education to respond to the needs of its constituents. And perhaps the strongest claim of all, as Popkewitz (2008) suggests, can be made by contrasting action by any means on behalf of “all children” against the looming failures of the public education system. Implicit in measures such as the federal “No Child Left Behind” accountability measure, Popkewitz (2008) argues, is in fact the figure of the “no child” or “no family,” who, despite having knowledge of the consequences of *status quo* unaccountable, unresponsive practices of public education, nevertheless refuses to subscribe to reform measures as they are developed through the collaboration of the public and private sectors. This child and his or her family is, in fact, meant to be left behind as the wheels of progress turn.

The periods of welfare and education reform have, in essence, radically changed popular conceptions of what constitutes a real “public” and who is to be included and excluded in the benefits of citizenship within a civic nation. While the raced and gendered bodies of welfare failure still loom in the collective subconscious of the populaces of the advanced economies of the West, a new abject subject, one that refuses to subscribe to the progressive merging of the public and the private, has been created. The elaboration of a nonprofit sector whose function is to efficiently channel private resources towards the public good has professionalized and institutionalized the skills through which this merger is realized. In turn the recipients of the

nonprofit sector's redistribution of private resources are reformed as citizens of the new hybrid public. As McKee (2011) cautions, however, the scope of this reformation are always only partial and contingent upon local circumstance. As the testimony of a Gates Foundation program officer suggests, no "one size fits all" program for inculcating the hybridization of the public and private spheres exists; it is precisely by tailoring collaborative projects to respond to the particular contexts in which partner institutions exist that the Foundation, as well as other granting organizations, judges its own success. Rather than a single vision of a newly formed sphere of politics in which private resources are supposedly directed toward the public good, then, we might think of multiple manifestations of the new public sphere, each drawing both on elements of an overarching neoliberal project while capitalizing upon the characteristics of the places in which it holds sway.

At the scale of the state, remaking the ideal citizen as a self-sufficient, self-reliant political subject has been a strategy pursued by governments worldwide as exogenous economic forces undermine national unity forged on the basis of membership in a civic polity (Isin and Wood 1999). As Rose (1999) argues, the age of "advanced liberalism" which characterizes the governments of the industrialized West is indelibly marked by predicating citizenship upon the successful entrepreneurship of the self. To see neoliberalism as a governmentalizing project handed down by the state and administered through the nonprofit sector is not new (e.g. Wilkins 2011, Roelofs 2005 in education reform; Morgen and Gonzales 2008, Boyer 2006 in the case of welfare reform). However, the ambiguities and silences of this project's key participants lend credence to a more nuanced view of how the neoliberal project is progressing through layers of governance from the central state to the individual. As conceptions of what – and who – counts as truly "public" shifts, practices of public governance based upon these conceptions are being

constantly negotiated in particular places. As the next two chapters will discuss, it is in particularly spatial imaginations of neoliberal governance – as urban regimes or the abstract “local” – that the politics of neoliberalism are formed, contested, and codified as replicable instances of innovation.

## Chapter 2: Moralizing urban geographies in education reform

A broad coalition of supportive community groups, corporations, local philanthropists, and school leaders made Seattle-Tacoma an ideal location for Teach For America. The organization [Teach for America] has raised nearly \$5 million to date, thanks in large part to lead investors including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Bezos Foundation, Raikes Foundation, The Seattle Foundation, JPMorgan Chase, philanthropists Ali and Hadi Partovi and Susan and Jeff Brotman.

-Teach for America, 18 January 2011 Press Release

### I. Introduction

The contemporary school reform movement has expanded from ideological conflicts over government's monopoly of public education to incorporate the participation of a diverse array of public and private entities. As seen in chapter 1, this expansion has relied in part upon a redefinition of norms of active citizenship that have normalized the insertion of private enterprise into claims made about education as a fundamentally public good. Another equally important factor has been the multiplication of relationships among the groups holding a stake in the reformation of public education. This multiplication in turn has been made possible by a fundamental shift in the way in which the city as a political space acts as a node for gathering, developing, and disseminating neoliberal policy regimes.

Within the advanced economies of the industrial West, the transition to neoliberal regimes of governance has taken place simultaneously if unevenly, at several political scales. While early commentaries upon the transition focused upon the turn to principles of market fundamentalism by national or supranational governing bodies, the manifestation of neoliberalism as an urban phenomenon, particularly within the West, remains somewhat less examined (Brenner and Theodore 2002a). And yet cities are key sites within which practices of neoliberal government are developed and elaborated. As state support has declined and the industrial base of many cities has disappeared, metropolitan regions are increasingly seeking ways to be "entrepreneurial" in consolidating their resources to attract national and global lines

of capital investment (Harvey 1989, 2000). Notably, it is within cities that the multiple contradictions of the reformation of the welfare state have played out between efforts to be globally and national competitive and managing increasing local inequality. Indeed, as Harloe (2001) suggests, the imperatives of interurban competition have reframed problems of urban social inequality from signs of welfare state failure to impediments to be overcome in creating a cohesive urban community that can be successful as a site of capital investment.

Consequently, the city as a political space has fundamentally changed from its role as a deputy carrying out national economic and social policy to be, as Isin (1998) claims, “increasingly like an empty shell that marks out the once-meaningful boundaries of the political” (178; see also Isin 1996). From its previous role as a regulatory space of social relations the city has evolved to function as a collection point for a diverse coalition of forces making up contemporary urban governance. Central to the mutation of cities as political spaces under neoliberalism are changes in the way in which urban governance maps the public and private spheres variously onto the regulatory capacity of institutions, communities, and individuals. As definitions of which areas of social life properly fall under the bailiwick of the public or the private have shifted drastically at broad discursive and ideological levels, the everyday practice of these definitions has been filtered through the institutional networks of urban government.

Highlighting the simultaneous, intersecting and often conflicting roles played by governmental and non-governmental groups involved in urban governance, Brown (1999) encourages us to rethink the political terrain of the public and private spheres along multiple dimensions. As he argues, by paying attention to the ways in which different groups perform the work of governing, we expand our ability to see the governance and definition of the public and private spheres instantiated not only through the state and the market but also through other sites

such as the community, the home, and the family. As I argue in this chapter, the school reform movement has played an important role in enrolling a wide variety of political spaces that complicate and elide portrayals of school reform efforts as simply bringing market forces into government-managed education. Crucially, as families, communities, and schools are recruited to the work of school reform they become embedded in multiscalar networks linking them as stakeholders in local systems education with the extralocal resources of the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. In turn these networks are becoming increasingly influential in contemporary urban governance in and beyond education as city government attempts to simultaneously respond to local constituencies with access to outside resources that can benefit the city as well as attract the attention of extralocal organizations whose support for local governance can make the city more competitive in attracting social and financial capital. And as the chapter epigraph suggests, “supportive” coalitions for school reform efforts are evaluated by their ability to focus in a local urban network an array of fiscal and political resources drawn from near and far.

Despite a certain amount of hollowing out of the city as a regulatory space on its own terms, urban spaces remain nevertheless important in organizing the work of education reform. If the work of contemporary urban governance in large part is carried out in attempts to coordinate local political priorities with extralocal funding priorities, this coordination is made possible in turn by a reimagining of the space of the city as a container within which social problems take place. By mapping the failures of the public education system onto a specific and bounded urban region, both local and nonlocal interests can be recruited to the cause on the basis of grounded, real-world service to a particular place. As will be seen in the case of Seattle, school reform efforts rely in part upon the idea of public school failures being located in a particular place to

successfully draw upon limited political and financial resources. First, though, it is necessary to consider how urban governance has evolved to act as a mechanism by which public and private efforts are hybridized towards the regulation of social issues.

## **II. The evolution of the city as a regulatory space under neoliberalism**

Scholars have carefully documented the multiple efforts over the past 30 years to render the space of the city more amenable to capitalist investment amidst industrial restructuring and the retrenchment of the welfare state. In particular, analyses have focused on the city's regulatory capacity to clear spaces of "undesirable" elements that present obstacles to attracting individual and corporate reinvestment in the form of gentrification (Smith 1996; Gibson 2004), monitoring putatively "public" space for deviant elements (Sibley 1995; D. Mitchell 2003; Davis 1992), and redefining and punishing so-called "lifestyle" crimes in attempts to eliminate vagrancy and panhandling (Wacquant 1999; Beckett and Herbert 2010).

While such heavy-handed policies remain firmly entrenched in cities' toolkits for securing space for reinvestment according to capitalists' dictates, it is becoming evident that the city as a political entity as fractured and contradictory as it is coherent as a sovereign power with the ability to intervene directly in the lives of its citizens. Murphy (2009), in writing of initiatives to address homelessness in San Francisco, notes that as cities have successfully reclaimed spaces for reinvestment by an economic elite the politics of managing those spaces has become more complex, in that

[t]he perceived "recurrent waves of unremitting danger and brutality" (Smith 1996: 212) that motivated the elite to reclaim the urban realm have largely disappeared in the face of widespread gentrification, giving rise to a deeply ambivalent new benevolence evident in a variety of new urban policies, including "compassionate" attempts to manage urban poverty. This post-revanchist compassion reflects the needs of local policymakers and politicians to mediate, on the one hand, the imperatives of capital investment and, on the other, the inevitable displacement and marginalization of large numbers of the urban poor in the face of neoliberal restructuring (311).

Somewhat perversely, as evidence of social dissolution produced by the period of welfare reform has become somewhat displaced by gentrification, political pressure to remove deviant populations has diminished. Cities themselves have become ambivalent, if still dominant, actors in framing and managing the signs of social deviancy. As DeVerteuil *et al.* (2009) argue, cities' response to social problems can no longer be read neatly off strategies for social control; indeed, their efforts routinely incorporate the resources and efforts of the private and nonprofit sectors, which in turn occupy ambiguous roles in both reproducing and addressing poverty, homelessness, and other urban social problems.

The complexity of roles and motivations identified in the period of contemporary urban governance is due as well in part to changing organizational relationships between city government and nonprofit or private sector actors. Drawing on Ling's (2000) characterization of neoliberal urban governance as a regime of "governmentality," May *et al.* (2005) highlight a discursive shift away from rationalizing the devolution of formerly public responsibilities to non-state actors. While during the period of "roll-back" neoliberalism shifting regulatory control to the private sector was justified in narrow terms of shrinking the welfare state, current regimes in UK homeless management highlight common interests among the public and private sectors in addressing social problems and privileging the creation of "partnerships" to tackle urban social problems. A model of public-private partnerships is spreading as well to education governance. Bulkley (2007) documents the case of the Philadelphia school district that is increasingly acting as a nodal point for contacting duties to various for- and nonprofit organizations. As she discovers, it is the network of relationships between the district and its subcontractors that map out lines of influence in Philadelphia education policy; other stakeholders without formalized relationships to the district, such as parents and business leaders not incorporated into existing

advocacy organizations, have little practical influence (177). While such a model certainly fits neatly into the framework of neoliberal devolution initiatives advocated out by market-based reform proponents (e.g. Hill *et al.* 1997; Hill *et al.* 2002), what is perhaps most interesting is the suggestion that groups' participation in the reform of education at the urban scale is made possible by their successful creation of relationships with either the school district or other institutions contracting their services with the school district.

In Seattle, the extent to which a contracting model of education governance is present is demonstrated in part by the presence of the Alliance for Education. The Alliance for Education, formed in 1995 on the initiative of a set of business and community leaders, is made up of a board of directors drawn largely from the Seattle region's business community and acts as a meeting point for public and private interests in Seattle-area education. The Alliance serves the Seattle district in managing private donations and making investments on the district's behalf, acting, in its own words, "much like an accounting department, offering financial and donor management services that schools and other groups would otherwise not have available to them" ("Educational Investments," avail: <http://www.alliance4ed.org/investments/fiscalservices.htm>). The shape of the Alliance's involvement with Seattle school reform has changed over time. During the period when Seattle Public Schools was attempting to implement its small schools initiative the Alliance played an active role in collaborating with SPS staff on strategy for in-school implementation as well as community engagement (personal interview, 3/25/2011). Today, the Alliance's role has contracted somewhat, with its most notable recent contribution to Seattle education being the solicitation of philanthropic funding in support of the district's strategic plan *Excellence for All* in 2009. Through these periods of shifting direct involvement, though, the Alliance has been a constant point of reference for the city's reform efforts. In

addition to being a recipient of the devolution of critical administrative roles from the public to private sectors, the Alliance is also a point at which private initiatives including philanthropic and advocacy organizations meet, elaborate common goals, and exchange resources in pursuit of the mission of reforming Seattle schools.

Although public-private partnerships like that represented by the relationship between Seattle Public Schools and the Alliance for Education fit into classic neoliberal policy models of privatizing state functions, The Alliance and other organizations contracting with school districts represent more than the creation of a gap in governmental control over education to simply be filled in by business interests. Equally important, argues Gough (2002), is the degree to which different actors in urban governance under neoliberalism are *socialized* through their participation in such partnerships. As he notes, the importance of institutional frameworks such as the Alliance for Education within which professional and personal relationships between education reforms are developed is as much in creating new forms of collaboration as it is in siphoning state oversight for public institutions to private interests. By reincorporating actors left behind during the initial period of state roll-back, such coalitions mobilize aspects of urban cooperation not typically given value according to the strict dictates of market fundamentalism: “nonmarket relations, cooperation in production, skill and innovation, community, pluralism” (424). Similarly, with its support for and involvement in implementing *Excellence for All*, the Alliance gives value to a set of relationships uniting philanthropy, education advocacy organizations, and families in a common cause that at once makes use of and contests the market as an arbiter of policy decisions:

The Alliance, an independent nonprofit organization that builds community support for Seattle Public Schools, worked in close partnership with the school district to secure the grant funding. The Alliance will play a lead role in managing the funding, tracking, evaluating and communicating results, and engaging the community. Accountability—to students, to families and to the community—is a cornerstone of Excellence for All. Seattle Public Schools and the Alliance for Education are putting in place specific accountability

measures to ensure that funding is directed as specified in grants (Press Release 10 March 2009; available: <http://www.alliance4ed.org/news/excellenceforall.htm>).

As the case of the Alliance suggests, contemporary urban governance makes heavy use of coalitions to broaden the terrain of political engagement and incorporate a diverse group of market and nonmarket relationships. Discursively, the line between purely market-based strategies for reform and nonmarket considerations – solidarity, care, and loyalty to place – is blurred so that it is sometimes difficult to see where one set of values ends and another begins. This has been made possible by widening a pool of potential institutional participants incorporated into a cause of urban governance through strategic relationships between organizations. In addition, a critical element in urban coalition-building has been to redefine the political terrain of the city as a community that naturally implicates a group of stakeholders in various issues of social governance. The politics of this city-community consist of securing membership in this group to be counted among those who can legitimately stake a claim to determining the course of education reform. In the context of education reform, broadening the definition of the community implicated in reform efforts is instrumental in creating a coherent case for intervening in failures of the public school system. Organizations like the Alliance for Education legitimize the membership of business interests in this “community” by bringing them directly into the work of crafting innovative policy for school reform efforts and highlighting a purportedly natural interest in addressing social issues in the place where they operate and employ workers. In addition, by managing philanthropic investments made to Seattle Public Schools, they draw those funders into the community of interest based around the common cause of crafting a purportedly better and more responsive school system.

However, not all coalitions are created equal in terms of education reform efforts. As coalitions become increasingly bureaucratized, they fall into what Fyfe, quoting Brown (1997), calls “the paradox of the shadow state:”

If third sector organisations [sic] are to conform to the localised vision in national policy discourse by being essentially neighbourhood-based, grassroots groups, they are unlikely to be able to contribute to service delivery in the way that the government hopes. Yet it is clear that organisations that do professionalise and restructure their services run the risk of disempowering citizens both within organisations as a result of developing a hierarchical structure with clear divisions between volunteers and paid staff, and outside organisations by reproducing the bureaucrat–client relationship characteristic of government organisations (Fyfe 2005, 552).

Nevertheless, not all place-based coalitions are created equal. It is those well-organized and bureaucratized coalitions that can draw upon private and philanthropic capital that appear to be dominating the policy discourse surrounding education reform. Contrasting with the Alliance for Education is another reform-minded organization known as the Alternative Schools Coalition (ASC), a largely grassroots organization made up of parents who organized in during the early 2000s to oppose the closure of some of Seattle district’s “alternative schools” - which are part of the public system but support students whose learning styles made it difficult for them to achieve in the traditional school system. The alternative schools were originally established by charter with the school district in the 1970s, and have flexibility in their curriculum and teaching style similar to that accorded to charter schools. The round of closures that the parents organized around followed a previous spate of school closures, many of them in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In addition, the district began proposing curriculum alignment policies that would have effectively eliminated the alternative schools’ ability to flexibly tailor their curriculum and teaching strategies to their students (personal interview, 10/18/2011).

In part, the impetus to organize and make the case for alternative schools arose out of a sense that the district did not recognize the contribution of alternative schools to the education of Seattle’s children:

I think part of it was just the idea that, since we'd been flying under the radar for so long, and so clearly this sort of new approach [curriculum alignment] of micromanagement and homogeneity, there's no way we were going to be able to fly under the radar anymore. That, either we were going to directly be shut down or they were going to say, "here are all these standards, why aren't you holding to them" – well, we have all these agreements [with the school district] – "they're not written down anywhere." So to me, when I came in, it was really this point of, "well, let's take this above board and be purposeful." (personal interview, ASC parent and member, 10/18/2011).

The result of this organization was the production of a report in 2005 that documented the alternative schools' methods and outcomes in educating students who were not successful in traditional schooling. This was followed again in 2009 by another round of organizing by a new group of parents who learned from the "old guard" about the Coalition's dealings with the district. As described by one of the parents involved in these efforts, the turnover in both the Coalition's membership (whose children had graduated from Seattle Public Schools) and within the governance of the district led to "lost knowledge" about the purpose and nature of alternative schools, and led to a new round of struggle for recognition from the district and against proposed audits through careful efforts to document and describe the alternative schools' methods and outcomes (personal interview, 10/18/2011). Despite these efforts of the Coalition to articulate the definition and mission of Seattle's alternative schools, the schools themselves remain conspicuous by their absence in Seattle Public Schools publications and PR materials:

Chris: So, the district does not indicate [particular] schools as "alternative" schools.

Bill: Well, an exemplar of that is that you look at the website and try to find, I'd like to see what are the seven alternative schools, or an alternative school. You could not find what you're looking for unless you already knew where it was [on the website]. It's impossible. So to me, that's a very obvious manifestation of [laughs] – of a lot of things...

Chris: So a lot of the knowledge is maintained by word of mouth and personal relationships?

Bill: Well, word of mouth is very powerful among parents... that is enormous, is talking to people about schools. But I remember when I started looking for schools for my kid who's now in sixth grade, my first kid, we went to eleven different schools, and even though I'd gone to alternative education in Seattle and to an alternative college, I didn't think, "oh, I'm going to take him to an alternative school." We went to a bunch of schools – literally eleven – and then we got to our kids' alternative school and were just like, "yeah, this feels right" (personal interview, ASC parent and member, 10/18/2011).

In addition, the parents involved in the effort to advocate for the alternative schools described their work as contrasting with the district's efforts to define educational outcomes

based on testing and to set aside a sector of the public education system explicitly for the purpose of providing a place for students not served by the public system:

Alice: It's a hard message, because their message at the time was, "every student can be served in a neighborhood school, *every* student. And we're like, you know, we're *not* for every student. I personally happen to believe that we happen to better serve a majority than the current model, but much of our argument is like, "my kid can't sit still enough to go to Wedgwood [Elementary School]. And the individual attention, you know, my child needs to work at their [sic] own pace, that kind of thing, they [the district] just do not want to acknowledge that that can't happen in a traditional classroom. They want to pretend that all that can happen in a traditional classroom.

Bill: And part of this is, there's the survival of these seven [alternative] schools, and then frankly I'd like to go on the attack and in the meantime say we probably need to expand them. You know, particularly the third graders who don't know how to read, one of the key issues that comes up is around student engagement, which precedes – that's in that first year or two – and that precedes learning, and knowledge, and all of these, quote, "outcomes." And the part of student engagement in alternative schools, in alternative education, is project-based learning, particularly with all these young, active males, particularly in the south end [of Seattle] where we continue to have a lot of racism and redlining, all these types of things that have a lot of history, we should be expanding alternative schools to meet the needs of those kids (personal interview, ASC parents and members, 10/18/2011).

This vision of public education contrasts directly with the priorities set out in the district's strategic plan *Excellence for All*, itself funded through the involvement of the Alliance for Education. In addition, the efforts of the ASC to engage in a process of self-study as an alternative to the district's efforts to audit the alternative schools immediately ran up against a conflict of evaluation styles. The ASC was committed to the idea of describing the activities of the alternative schools in terms of a educational process, while SPS – itself influenced by the metrics put in place by its own funders, most notably the Gates Foundation, was focused almost entirely on educational outcomes as a metric for evaluating the efficacy of programs (personal interview, ASC parent and member, 10/18/2011).

In effect, the process of evaluating the alternative schools had to be reinvented from the ground up, and the parent in charge of coordinating the process described the difficulty of undertaking this task:

We had these 80 quality indicators, and actually, my school, at one of our retreats, we went through an exercise where we broke up into groups, went through the indicators...and I said, "okay! What are we going to do about this?" They're like, "oh no, this is just to let you know about them." I'm like, "no, no, no. There's something here, and these actually aren't measurable – most of these are not measurable the way

they were written. They were compound questions, they weren't even questions, there was no scalability, that kind of stuff. And so I started trying to reach out to people to try and find out, "anybody else ever done this?" I started trying to look at national literature, I talked to every person I knew who had an education doctorate, tried to reach out to the [University of Washington], the first and only bite I got – that was the Paul Allen Family Foundation... I sat down with a guy, Anson Fatland [sic], basically just went in and said, "I can't find anything about anyone who's ever done this, which is unbelievable to me that no one's ever tried to do this. It just makes no sense to me. It's a process-based endeavor, that's what teachers *do*. And why we want to document that, because if you don't document that, you can't justify it and rationalize it and make it continue to exist (personal interview, ASC parent and member, 10/18/2011).

It is notable that in contrast to the considerable resources available to choice-based education reform efforts through national and local funding and knowledge networks, there was no apparent model for evaluating an alternative model of education available to the ASC. In addition, as the above parent continued in his efforts, he noted that interest from the Paul Allen Foundation eventually died away with the transfer of the contact he made there to another job. Efforts to reach out to the research arm of the University of Washington's School of Education were met with disinterest as well.

In contrast to the broad coalitions built around choice-based school reform that have had considerable impact upon the Seattle school district, the ASC was able to achieve only limited success in advocating for their unique educational mission and their data have been used by the school district to advertise alternative schools for potentially interested parents or even explain the fundamental differences between alternative and traditional education in Seattle. In effect, the differing priorities of the alternative education system to those promoted by the district and its funders have relegated alternative education to a subordinate status within the district. While the alternative schools remain part of the district's educational offerings, little official effort has been put towards recognizing them or directing students who might be well served in them to them. In the following section I turn to a possible explanation for this that rests upon the "failure" of the ASC to conform to an imagined moral geography of the Seattle area's education system.

Because they necessarily and properly only represent a limited number of students and families

within the district, the ASC is at a distinct disadvantage in terms of their ability to attract the support of extralocal funding and technical expertise. The more coalitions that have been most successful in making their vision of education reform into an aspirational norm and thus attract philanthropic capital to their cause, by contrast, have been able to shape their vision for choice-based school reform into an all-encompassing imaginary of the space of the urban area as a place where education efforts have completely failed and wholesale intervention is necessary.

### **III. Urban obligations to place in contemporary education reform**

As described in Chapter 1, accompanying the changing conceptions of the range of possible interventions within education has been a hybridization of the private and public interests that hold a stake in educational outcomes. In particular the city's evolution from a regulatory space to a space of coalition building has brought together a diverse group of governmental institutions, constituent groups and private capital by remapping the failures of public education onto a community coextensive with the space of the city. As a result the field of education reform has become reimagined as more than an abstract moral impetus to respond to a problem of failing public schools. Instead, the failures of public education have become embedded, as Brown (2006) argues in the case of the mobilization of the gay community in Seattle around sexually transmitted diseases, within a moral *geography* discursively obligating all those residing in the space within which the problem is bounded to choose to participate or not in the proposed solution. Rose (2000) likewise argues that power in neoliberal regimes rests in part with the ability to delineate a field of responsibility to be allocated to particular communities or individuals. In the case of school reform, responsibility is normatively located with a coalition of willing partners who draw on the full range of available resources – public as

well as private – so that education can be improved for society as a whole. Indeed, the reimagining of urban space as a moral geography of community elides the public’s conventional understandings of players in school reform as being constituted by public or private interests (See McGuirk and Dowling 2009; Clarke 2004)

One way in which this has occurred has been to discursively situate the reform efforts of particular urban school districts as implicating the participation of actors at multiple political scales. Describing newspaper coverage of the charter school movement in Atlanta, Hankins and Martin (2006) argue that the Atlanta Journal-Constitution’s consistent support for charter schools over time depends in part upon a multiscale positioning of Atlanta’s charter schools. While advocating for charter schools as institutions that are both able to respond to local communities’ educational preferences while flexibly preparing students for the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce, the paper called upon the not only local students and their parents but also employers and state legislators as parties who could play a pivotal role in bringing such a competitive advantage to the Atlanta area. In particular the paper made special mention of the many corporate-sponsored vocational training programs in place at area high schools that were preparing students for immediate post-graduation employment. Similarly, the editorial page of the Seattle Times reprimanded state legislators for not taking an opportunity to pass a law eliminating seniority as a factor in determining teacher layoffs in Washington state while attempting to overcome a \$6 billion budget shortfall during the 2011 legislative session:

The districts that choose to cut teacher pay — or lay people off — will do so with the usual hand-wringing, dogged by union rules, parents and their own staffs. And they will do what they always do, sparing the teachers with the most seniority, then cutting the last ones hired. That means getting rid of some teachers who could have been great, had Olympia given them a chance. It could have, though, which may be the most painful part in all of this. This session, lawmakers voted down legislation that would have eliminated the "last hired, first laid-off" policy in public schools, and prioritized teachers who have proved their value ("Send them to the back of the class," *Seattle Times* 26 May 2011).

In both the Atlanta and Seattle cases, appeals for school reform involved choosing expanding the moral geographies of both urban school districts to encompass groups whose influence could make a difference in determining the outcome. Notably, contrary to some discussions of school reform that weigh the negative characteristics of public school systems against the flexibility of private interventions, here the participation of different stakeholders groups is not coded public or private but is implicated based on their proximity to the failures outlined in each account.

In addition to expanding constituencies with a stake in education reform from within, framing education reform within a regional moral geography extends as well to enhancing the desirability of an urban area in order to attract reform initiatives from outside. For example, when the teaching service organization Teach for America (TFA) announced in late 2010 that it would revisit the Seattle-Tacoma area as a partner site for its programs, the decision was hailed by Chris Korsma, CEO of the Seattle-based League of Education Voters, as a measure to competitively retain the talent represented by TFA's recruits:

“Bringing Teach for America (TFA) to the Puget Sound is a real breakthrough in our focus on the achievement gap,” said LEV’s Chief Executive Officer Chris Korsmo. “Their commitment to the kids and schools that struggle the most is extraordinary. It’s long overdue – we’ve been exporting talent to other TFA sites and it’s high time we tapped into that resource and kept these talented individuals in the Puget Sound area.” (League of Education Voters blog 18 January 2011, available: <http://www.educationvoters.org/2011/01/18/teach-for-america-announces-expansion-into-seattle-tacoma/>).

The moral obligation suggested by Korsma becomes clearer upon considering the nature of TFA. By its own description, the organization recruits a corps of mostly (though not exclusively) recent college graduates, to make up a corps of ad-hoc teachers to be temporarily deployed in areas where a crisis of academic achievement has been identified. Notably, TFA explicitly does not require previous teaching experience of its candidates, instead opting for qualities that emphasize leadership and organizational skills:

Here are the skills we seek to identify throughout our application and interview process:

- Demonstrated past leadership and achievement: achieving ambitious, measurable results in academic, professional, extracurricular, or volunteer settings
- Perseverance and sustained focus in the face of challenges
- Strong critical thinking skills: making accurate linkages between cause and effect and generating relevant solutions to problems
- Superior organizational ability: planning well and managing responsibilities effectively
- Respect for individuals' diverse experiences and effectively working with people from a variety of backgrounds
- Superior interpersonal skills to motivate and lead others
- Thorough understanding of and desire to work relentlessly in pursuit of our vision <sup>11</sup>

Lahann and Regan (2011) situate Teach for America's criteria, as well as the rest of their mission, within a political discourse of "progressive neoliberalism." By promoting an alternative route to the teaching profession for promising young college graduates, TFA makes use of neoliberal principles of deregulation in order to pursue a agenda of social justice. As is the case with many other choice-based reform efforts, this combination of approaches is not necessarily cynical or driven by ulterior motives. Rather, it represents a radically different way of thinking about the role of public and private resources than has been imagined previously. In this case, talent imported from domains outside education and fostered through the introduction of private capital is imagined as a primary avenue for improving public education. That is, by introducing promising talent into the teaching field, the failures of public education can be overcome and the quality of education for all children improved. Similar to the discourses of parental aspiration discussed in Chapter 1, this vision relies on a notion that the entrepreneurial talent of enthusiastic young people naturally lends itself to the best possible education outcomes for students. In the case of TFA, though, this entrepreneurial talent has an explicit geography attached – it is in those places where the failures of the public education system are the greatest that the aspirational abilities of TFA recruits will make the biggest impact.

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<sup>11</sup> Available: <http://www.teachforamerica.org/why-teach-for-america/who-we-look-for/how-we-evaluate-applicants>

This geographic identification of teaching resources in turn reinforces the imagination of urban school systems as sites of necessary intervention. By situating TFA's human capital as a scarce and footloose resource, Korsma highlights a necessity to take action to frame the Seattle-Tacoma area as an attractive region for the program and its participants. Korsma's remarks were not simply rhetorical; instrumental in securing the region as a TFA site is support offered by the University of Washington (UW) School of Education, under the deanship of TFA program alumnus Tom Stritikus. In consultation with Seattle Public Schools and TFA administration, Stritikus offered Seattle-Tacoma TFA staff the opportunity to earn their obligatory Masters of Teaching degree through the UW alongside students enrolled in the traditional program (Peters 2011). Amidst criticism that highlighted the inequity of allowing TFA recruits to obtain at no cost to themselves and partially at the expense of the school district the same degree that costs up to \$50,000 for out-of-state students as well as Stritikus and then-superintendent Maria Goodloe-Johnson's personal ties to TFA founder Wendy Kopp, Stritikus defended the alternative certification program not on the merits of TFA itself but as an opportunity to involve the UW in the cutting edge of teacher training:

But even though Stritikus is a Teach for America alumnus himself, he said the UW's partnership with Teach for America shouldn't been seen as an endorsement of that program. The UW, he said, plans to seek funding to answer questions about whether Teach for America's training model is a good one. "At a broader level," he said, "this is a really great opportunity for a research university ... to push its thinking about what the features and the content of really effective teacher education is" (Shaw 2011).

As the UW faces unprecedented state budget cuts and tuition across undergraduate and graduate programs increases at an alarming rate, Stritikus's entrepreneurial framing of the new alternative certification program is inscribed in a common-sense necessity to seek out as many avenues as possible for increasing revenue from funders interested in supporting research innovation. In fact, Washington STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics], a statewide

nonprofit formed at the initiative of Bill Gates and heavily funded by the Gates Foundation, will cover the \$4,000 fee per TFA recruit charged by the organization to its partner school districts (“Washington STEM awards 15 Grants,” available: <http://stemgrants.com/washington-stem-awards-15-grant>), suggesting that entrepreneurial behavior in the pursuit of innovations in teacher training will be rewarded.

Paradoxically, TFA’s reintroduction to Seattle appears to simultaneously be framed in isolation as a program whose benefits will uniquely accrue to the city while implying a set of competing places who have to be outdone in order to retain advantages of efficient education governance. In effect, Seattle’s ties to the experience of similar urban school districts is excluded from the geographic imagination of advocates even as the necessity to capture TFA’s investment over and above outside potential sites is underlined.

#### **IV. Neoliberalism’s “moral” geographies of the urban**

Scholars of urban governance under neoliberalism have been attentive to the ways in which the state has strategically rolled back its support so as to roll out of new forms of regulation that recruit individuals, families, and communities as active participants in their own governance. At the urban scale, scholars such as Brenner and Theodore (2002b) and Fuller (2010) remind us that the move towards neoliberal governance is a path-dependent process that borrows as much from preexisting relationships of power as it innovates and creates new ones. The inability to entirely tear down institutional arrangements and relationships between different actors creates obstacles to a complete devolution of power from the state to structures of civil society and the private sector. In particular, the notion of community as a mechanism for neoliberal governance represents a potential sticking point for state regimes wishing to download

their governing responsibilities, either because of the possibility for communities to offer alternative notions of citizenship to that proposed by the retrenching state, as Staeheli (2008) argues, or because of the illegibility of “community” as a governing principle to the people who are meant to govern themselves as such (Herbert 2005). As discussed in Chapter 1, communities of parental aspiration that are meant to be a catalyzing force in bringing about school reform cannot be taken for granted and often must be created where they previously didn’t exist. And as the example of the Alternative Schools Coalition in Seattle demonstrates, the creation of community-based initiatives can diverge from the goals of neoliberal reform and represent an obstacle to the goals of choice-based reformers.

I propose that reimagining the space of the city as a moral supercommunity is a way in which both of these stumbling blocks are circumvented. In particular, by framing a problem such as the failure of public education entirely within the space of the city, a sense of geographic urgency is created in which all efforts that can claim some sort of residency in the particular urban setting, regardless of the means by which they are accomplished, are deemed fair game in addressing the issue at hand. “Claiming residency” can be accomplished, of course, by being physically present – as is the case for local advocacy organizations, for example – but also by entering into relationships with local actors that, for the purposes of tackling the clear and present danger of failing public schools, are the equivalent of having a local political stake. Just as citizenship in an abstract sense is shifting to privilege activism that creatively combines the resources of the private and public sectors, so the city is adopting a new spatial imagination that privileges the combining of all available hands on deck to address a problem locally defined within the boundaries of a particular place. As a result, distinctions commonly drawn between the interests of the private and public sectors are breaking down to the point of being

meaningless. Building upon the existing impetus to be entrepreneurial in order to attract economic investment, cities are likewise becoming entrepreneurial in their attempts to attract the most potent coalitions of social governance by framing problems of social problems as ones that are fundamentally addressable by an effective gathering and deploying of local resources. Hybridizations of public and private governance, such as the heavy involvement of the Alliance for Education in Seattle's reform efforts, are emerging as a result. As in the case of the Alliance, it is often local organizations that are leveraging the resources of both local and non-local actors in particular places. In doing so, they contribute to a discourse that defines the scale of the problem at hand and its solution as entirely coextensive with the local space of the urban region as the place where strategy is elaborated, resources are pooled and efforts coordinated. It is on the very basis of this discursive geographic bounding of the space of intervention – the city or its metropolitan area – that extralocal resources are attracted and deployed.

The moral geography of the city is one that challenges all institutions and organizations within the space of a particular to evaluate their participation or non-participation in the web of relationships formed around particular locally-defined social problems. Paradoxically, this geography may be surreptitiously shifting non-market considerations of solidarity, obligation, and care into market relationships by instrumentalizing them as means of further hybridizing the public sphere of civic society and introducing private interests into matters of public good. This is not necessarily an inevitable process; as efforts such as the Alternative Schools Coalition demonstrate, it is possible that such non-market logics of social organizing can be mobilized to truly public ends in the service of children and their families. Indeed, while the space of the metropolitan region can be used as a gathering point for capital interests and the further devolvement of public responsibility, it is just as likely that the moral imagination of the city can

be deployed for the advancement of what Massey (2005) terms “geographies of responsibility,” a possibility that I reflect upon further in the conclusion to this work.

What is more certain is that neoliberal governance is increasingly trading on the sovereignty of localities as a means of efficiently implementing and testing innovations in social policy. As the next chapter will discuss, by recruiting particular schools, districts, and students into projects of school reform tailored to their individual needs, a multiplication of sites of reform is resulting. This multiplication, while still contained within the imagined moral geographies of urban spaces, is effectively spreading the risk of reform efforts and creating a corps of participants who willingly enter into competitive and recursive processes of capturing footloose resources for their efforts.

## Chapter 3: Repositioning the “local” within school reform

### I. Introduction

In the early 1990s, Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) ran a pilot project that brought a range of support services to a single block. The idea was to address all the problems that poor families were facing: from crumbling apartments to failing schools, from violent crime to chronic health problems.

HCZ created a 10-year business plan, then to ensure its best-practice programs were operating as planned, HCZ was in the vanguard of nonprofits that began carefully evaluating and tracking the results of their work. Those evaluation results enabled staff to see if programs were achieving their objectives and to take corrective actions if they were not.

In 1997, the agency began a network of programs for a 24-block area: the Harlem Children's Zone Project. In 2007, the Zone Project grew to almost 100 blocks. Today the Children's Zone® serves more than 8,000 children and 6,000 adults. Overall, the organization serves more than 10,000 children and more than 7,400 adults. The FY 2010 budget for the agency overall is over \$75 million.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most pervasive trends in contemporary education reform has been the implementation of initiatives through school- or district-level projects. Although Federal and other large-scale programs like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have had and continue to have a major impact on schooling in the United States, it is at the most local levels where changes in education policy ranging from the incremental to the profound are being devised and tested on a daily basis. Prominent examples of local-scale change in education governance, such as the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) Promise Academy charter schools under the leadership of Geoffrey Canada, are commonly held as exemplars of the way forward for the public school system as a whole. Typically, by acting as vehicles to scale up the collective efforts of parents and teachers, these projects are notable for their embodiment of both the principles of active citizenship described in Chapter 1 and the urban moral geographies of participation in education reform outlined in Chapter 2. Local organizations such as the League of Education Voters, the Alliance for Education, and the Our Schools Coalition project the aspirations of families and communities onto urban-scale politics and foster the creation of city-based resource networks

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<sup>12</sup> Available: <http://www.hcz.org/about-us/history>

that act as points that shape reform efforts according to the funding criteria of funding organizations.

However, the evolution of the school reform movement has depended upon more than a discursive call to action to improve public education. The relationship between large-scale ideological prescriptions for reform and individual projects is developed through the practice itself of implementing, emulating, and modifying innovations in education policy. In fact, many local projects that began as initiatives to respond to locally-defined need have ascended to higher levels of policy in the form of education “best practices.” For example, the HCZ has become the inspiration for the Federally-funded Promise Neighborhoods program, a spectrum of social services described as a “comprehensive place-based approach to support children from birth through college” (Promise Neighborhoods Institute, available: [promiseneighborhoodsinstitute.org/what-is-a-pn/](http://promiseneighborhoodsinstitute.org/what-is-a-pn/)). As communities across the country apply for money from Promise Neighborhoods, the HCZ model will become increasingly emulated and new permutations may become models in their own right that will further influence national funding priorities. And as the epigraph above suggests, many of these projects, like HCZ, began as relatively small-scale initiatives that were successful in capturing the attention of philanthropic capital in order to jump scale and ascend to the level of regional or national policy. At the same time, there exist countless failed examples of similarly small-scale initiatives that are discarded by knowledge-making networks but whose effects remain embedded in the lives of the people who were affected by them. Although some charter schools, like HCZ, go on to be successful and positively shape the lives of the children and families who pass through them, other charter schools – especially those run by for-profit companies – close after only a few years of operation, leaving the families they served to deal with the resulting fallout.

Below the profile of organizations like the HCZ, though, are hundreds of projects that collectively form a pool of examples of school reform that is managed and studied by policy networks in order to provide empirical evidence backing up the efficacy of particular initiatives. While the terms of these individual projects are largely determined by their funders, individual school districts and even schools inevitably adapt the project to respond to local conditions. This chapter discusses one such project in Seattle that aimed at dividing the city's high schools into smaller learning academies as an example emblematic of the encounter between the local politics of school reform and the policy prescriptions of large-scale funding networks. Over the course of this Seattle Public Schools-directed initiative funded by the Gates Foundation, the original vision for small school transformation was modified and ultimately abandoned through administrative attrition. To see the small schools transformation project simply as a failed school reform initiative and a rebuke of the Gates Foundation's policy priorities, though, would be simplistic. As Peck *et al.* (2010) note, the neoliberal project of gradually devolving areas of government responsibility to the private sector depends upon a corps of local-scale projects that provides a large number of testing grounds for particular initiatives. In essence, the transition to neoliberal governance is accomplished through a trial-and error-process in which failure is as important as success for providing mid-course corrections. As individual instances of success and failure accrue to a particular set of policy prescriptions, these experiences are used to as models to be emulated or avoided.

Consequently, as schools, districts, and even families are granted more and more autonomy in their choices regarding educational policy, they are simultaneously given the responsibility of dealing with the consequences of failed initiatives. As the "local" is reified as a supremely sovereign site where education policy can be best crafted to meet the needs of its

particular context, the agents of these local spaces become entangled in processes of competitive policy creation that isolate sites of innovation from one another even as they respond to a common set of policy prescriptions. As Fyfe (2005) points out, the community-based approach to neoliberal policy reform is one marked by such contradictions. Especially as local actors are increasingly called upon to exercise their free initiative through aspirational politics as discussed in Chapter 1 and the non-profit and private sectors become increasingly embroiled in the business of social government at the urban scale as discussed in Chapter 2, the contradictions of local government begin to multiply as the original goals of local empowerment run up against the aims of neoliberal governance:

If third sector organisations [sic] are to conform to the localised vision in national policy discourse by being essentially neighbourhood-based, grassroots groups, they are unlikely to be able to contribute to service delivery in the way that the government hopes. Yet it is clear that organisations that do professionalise and restructure their services run the risk of disempowering citizens both within organisations as a result of developing a hierarchical structure with clear divisions between volunteers and paid staff, and outside organisations by reproducing the bureaucrat–client relationship characteristic of government organisations (552).

The bureaucratization that Fyfe refers to finds its expression especially in the context of funding cycles and the process of applying for grants from philanthropic or non-profit organizations. Often, addressing failed reform projects involves applying for a new round of funding and making changes based upon revisions to funding guidelines made since the original reform implementation. As will be seen in the case of Cleveland High School, a decade of ambivalent gains in educational outcomes did not preclude several rounds of funding for successive projects to reform to the school's educational practices. At the same time, the Gates Foundation learned from its experience in making grants for public education and significantly changed its institutional granting strategies as a result of its dealings with Seattle Public Schools. When Tyee High School in a neighboring district applied for funding to carry out a similar process of small-school transformation, it sought its funding through different channels that had been established

as a result of the Gates Foundation's adaptation. In essence, the schools and the region as a whole became and remains a site of perpetual testing and proving for the local choice-based reform movement's goals.

## **II. Multiplying networks, mutating policy in education reform**

It is well known that since the beginnings of the shifts to neoliberal policy regimes in the 1980s, the shift to more intensely localized systems of policy creation and implementation has resulted in a variegated landscape of policy outcomes. With fewer resources being distributed from a central bureaucracy, the success of places in creating prosperity has depended more and more upon their ability to capture and take advantage of a footloose set of resources (e.g. Harvey 1989, 2005). However, recent research has suggested that the inequities resulting from neoliberal reforms are not a side effect but endemic to the neoliberal regime itself. Writing in the context of “workfare” programs that heralded the reformation of the Federal welfare system in the mid-1990s, Peck (2002) argues that geographically uneven economic benefits gained as a result of implementing workfare reforms are critical in creating a sense of urgency around identifying and emulating the most successful cases (see also Peck and Tickell 2002). This urgency in turn engages the efforts of local actors both in “making policy as well as implementing it” (356) as they respond to the impetus to innovate locally in order to competitively capture limited resources. As a result, the work of local actors gains significance beyond its immediate context, as

loaded narratives of successful workfare programming are clearly generating transformative effects in the wider discourse of welfare reform, establishing a form of extralocal ideological leverage over local reform efforts in other jurisdictions. In important respects, these reform efforts have ceased to be local in a literal sense, but acquire their significance and meaning when understood in the wider context of the glocalizing reform process of which they are an active part (356-357).

The need to devise effective local policy in response to social problems is spurred not only by a drawdown of central resources, but also by the high visibility of successful instances of local innovation promoted by a network of nonprofit and philanthropic organizations that fund projects and disseminate their results. Successful initiatives devised by local actors in response to the exigencies of their circumstances, then, exist simultaneously as policy in practice as well as examples promoted by extralocal networks and taken up elsewhere by practitioners in hope of emulating the original policy's success. This has the effect of creating an environment in which policies are, in the words of McCann and Ward (2010), both "mobilized and territorialized," simultaneously rooted in place and in transit from one place to another. In practice, though, it is not all policy that becomes footloose; as Peck *et al.* (2010) note, the most successful and marketable policy initiatives are cherry-picked to become taken up by knowledge-producing networks and reinscribed in particular places.

Even within nationwide initiatives, local institutions are privileged as sites of policy innovation and implementation. For example, the Knowledge is Power Project (KIPP) network of 99 charter schools across the country channels the resources of national scale philanthropic capital through the KIPP Foundation while affording each individual school total autonomy in its administration and curriculum. This hybrid scale system of governance is described on the organization's website as a means of franchising the KIPP system to be flexibly deployed in as many places as possible:

The KIPP Foundation does not manage KIPP schools. Each KIPP school or region is run independently by a KIPP-trained school leader and governed by a local board of directors.

The KIPP Foundation focuses its efforts on recruiting, training, and supporting outstanding leaders to open locally-managed KIPP schools in high-need communities, and to step into leadership roles in existing KIPP schools. It is also responsible for supporting excellence and sustainability across the network, as well as leading network-wide efforts to innovate and share best practices. The KIPP Foundation provides a variety of supports and services to KIPP schools and regions in areas such as legal services, real estate, technology, finance, governance, operations, communications, marketing, and development (KIPP FAQ, available: <http://www.kipp.org/about-kipp/faq>).

Indeed, the charter movement as a whole relies on fundamentally local systems of governance that cannot guarantee the success of individual sites based on their adherence to a set of centrally determined principles of successful school reform. As a recent report from the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes at Stanford University (CREDO) (2009) states, about 17% of charter schools nationwide show significant academic gains over their public sector counterparts. However, while the actual performance of individual charter schools remains contested, the movement itself relies less on the promise of performance and more on the promise of local self-determination and experimentation.

While the language of best practices and system-wide innovation expressed by KIPP as well as other education reform organizations is becoming inscribed increasingly within a “best practices” logic, the actual practice of reform is multiplying in widely diverging contexts without much central oversight. As Peck and Theodore (2010a) argue, traditional theories of policy transfer gloss over the unevenness of the terrain upon which practices of social governance operate by

invoke[ing] notions of rational diffusion and best-practice replication, critical approaches to policy mobility tend to explore open-ended and politicized processes of networking and mutation across shifting social landscapes. These may have followed a neoliberal patterning in recent years, though this too has been associated with an evolving, experimental policy repertoire, beset by contradictions, as opposed to some fixed blueprint.

As a result, the transfer of best practices from reform networks to schools and back again is only rarely realized as a policy mutations across places are unpredictable, and cannot be seen simply as carbon copies of ideally determined policy prescriptions (Peck and Theodore 2010a).

The unpredictability of policy transfer processes across space is demonstrated through a decade-long reform project that took place within the Seattle school district. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Gates Foundation gave the Seattle school district a multi-million dollar grant to

transform its large high schools into small learning communities. During this time, educators and administrators at Nathan Hale High School in north Seattle began looking at options to transform educational opportunities in what was an academically struggling inner-city school. At the beginning, their initiative was conceived within the local school community with recourse to outside ideas drawn from the wider pool of “school reform” concepts:

There were a core group of us who started learning about school reform. It started out – we had a disproportionality committee that was looking at how can we better serve our students of color, and then there was this core group of us that got really intrigued by school reform, and felt like, well, there are some things we could really do to change how we do schooling to better serve kids, not just tinker around the edges. And so, thankfully, we had a really supportive principal, and we were able to – over the course of a year – make a design that we felt was really going to better serve kids, and it involved cross-curricular collaboration, teaming between teachers and a cohort model for kids, a separate schedule for ninth graders from the rest of the school, and thematic-based units that were cross-curricular and based around social justice (personal interview with SPS administrator, 3/29/2011).

Although the program was successful to the degree it was implemented in the particular context of Nathan Hale, the program ran up against administrative roadblocks as it moved through the rest of the school district. In particular, although the Gates money was meant to be implemented specifically for the purpose of small learning community transformation across the entirety of the school district, a lack of interest from administrators at both the district level and within specific schools meant that the project simply failed to take hold in some places.

Jane: That was a district grant – it wasn’t a school based grant.

Chris: Oh, I see. So someone at the district applied on behalf of particular schools.

Jane: Yeah, it was all high schools.

Chris: Oh, it was all high schools?

Jane: Yeah, there were dollars going to every school.

Chris: But only a few schools ended up actually doing it?

Jane: Well, everyone got the dollars...that wasn’t seen as a successful investment on their [Gates Foundation’s] part (personal interview, SPS administrator, 3/29/2011)

Despite this, a former vice-principal who had helped implement Nathan Hale’s small learning community project was brought to Cleveland High School in south Seattle to foster its development there. At first the transformation was profound and far-reaching, with the creation of four themed learning academies after a year of planning. However, a lack of support at the highest level of the school’s administration quickly reduced the number of academies to three,

and then two, with the elimination of the Technical Arts Academy. This occurred in spite of measurable gains in student achievement within a short period of time (personal interview, 11/12/2010). By 2008, the school retained only its Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) academy as a separate program within the larger school. By then, with many of the initial gains in academic performance gone, the Seattle school district transformed Cleveland into an “Option School” with fewer restrictions on enrollment for students across the entire district in the hopes of attracting students to the school on the merits of this unique program. As of 2010, the high school’s regular academic program had been eliminated entirely, with Cleveland turned into a *de facto* charter school containing two STEM academies and a “College Readiness” academy for seniors.

Despite a clear vision for small-school transformation as defined by the terms of the Gates Foundation grant, ultimately the school district took the project in an unanticipated direction through the decisions and interest of individual administrators. Despite the initial success of the small learning academies at Cleveland, they were eventually abandoned in their original manifestation and replaced. Despite this, the Gates Foundation learned from their experience of and fundamentally changed their strategy for funding school reform projects, as one of the administrators who oversaw Cleveland’s initial transformation recalls:

And then the funding [for small schools transformation] came through from the Gates Foundation, and we were able to really do it well, and really do it effectively there, but none of the other schools in the district were doing really anything along the lines of what they were supposed to. And I think ultimately what the Gates Foundation figured out – and they wrote a report about three or four years later, that was supposed to be three years of funding, I think – was that if they didn’t have the complete buy-in from the school district leadership and the willingness on the leadership’s part to make sure that schools were doing what the grant money was intended to be doing, then it wasn’t viable for them to give money on that scale to an institution like a school district. They needed guarantees, they needed accountability, they needed some expectation that what they were intending to have happen with that money was actually going to be done with that money. (Former Cleveland high school vice-principal, personal interview 2/12/2011).

As a result, the Gates Foundation’s subsequent small learning communities grant given to the Highline school district south of Seattle was not bestowed directly upon the district; rather, it was

given to an organization called the Coalition for Essential Schools (CES) that oversees and grants in turn to a network or member schools. This represented a change in strategy on the part of the Gates Foundation: rather than recruit schools and districts directly through calls for proposals, it gave money to organizations whose missions were consistent with its own priorities regarding education reform. This is consistent with the information supplied by my informant at the Foundation, who described a process of vetting funding recipients based on mission alignment that had evolved by the time of the grant to CES.

It also represents a fundamental rescaling of funding opportunities. Rather than distributing money to an urban bureaucracy, with its inherent risks of political wrangling and administrative attrition, Gates chose to give its money to a network that was at once nationally organized and locally-based. In doing so the resources afforded by the Gates Foundation are at once locally accessible even as they filter through a national network of best practices and knowledge sharing with fewer obstacles to smooth policy transfer across space. For Tyee High School in the Highline district, the process involved a certain circumvention of the typical chain of command with its own district:

It was an interesting process...we had received a fairly large grant from the Coalition of Essential Schools, so we really had an external provider and when we got that part of the Memorandum of Understanding, it required us to break into small schools...we did become a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, and a lot of their schools are small schools. That got us looking more and more at small schools, and while we were doing that, the Coalition of Essential Schools put out an RFP [Request for Proposals] that we put in for, so we really were lucky in that what they were asking us to do, what they were asking in the grant was what we wanted to do. But it gave us a different process with the [Highline] district in that the district signed a Memorandum of Understanding saying that we could do this. There was [district school] board approval at some point, but there wasn't any formal process. We were actually asking them for more formal processes because we didn't know what we were doing... (Former Highline district educator, personal interview 4/23/2011).

In addition to providing a more direct conduit to funds and expertise, membership in this national network of partner schools also affords not only teachers and administrators but also students from the academies that make up the former Tyee High School the opportunity to travel to

national conferences and share experiences (personal interview 4/23/2011). By contrast, Cleveland High School, which remained embedded in its district governance structure while it undertook its own transformation, was in effect cut off from outside intervention other than the Gates funding it received through its district hierarchy.

The futures of both of these schools remains to be seen: Cleveland High has not seen significant increases in its educational outcomes despite the numerous changes that have taken place in its curriculum and governance. Most recently, it has been implicated in Seattle Public School's Southeast Initiative, which is using Federal money to improve outcomes at a group of schools in the city's poorer neighborhoods of color in southeast Seattle. Tyee High School, in its new formulation as a collection of several smaller high schools sharing the same campus, has seen consistent increases in its educational outcomes (personal interview, former Tyee administrator). Beyond these individual projects, however, what remains of vital interest for the future of school reform efforts in Seattle and beyond is the temporal commitment of funding organizations and nonprofits to districts and schools. During the administrative turnover that took place in Seattle Public Schools and that led to the eventual abandonment of the small school initiative as originally conceived at Cleveland, the capital and resources that had been devoted to reform were gradually spent or withdrawn. A question that needs to be asked, and is largely outside the purview of this work, is what happens to the schools and students "left behind" by the mobility of philanthropic capital and reform efforts.

### **III. The supremacy and the fragility of "the local" in neoliberal governance evolution**

As has been made clear, a key strategy of recent neoliberal governance trends has been to rely upon local decision-making bodies and consensus to facilitate the introduction of reform

projects to particular places. As the case of transformation at Tyee High School demonstrates, where such local capacity did not exist, it is produced to a greater or lesser extent in order to further the chances of the project's success. At Cleveland, where similar efforts were not undertaken, a lack of public buy-in left the small schools transformation project undefended when administrative turnover and attrition began to erode the project's gains. This is not to say that attempts to engage communities and solicit local input are necessarily cynical or motivated by ulterior motives; however, what is becoming clear is that choice-based reform interventions require local support and have a reduced chance of being successful if they are simply forced upon places. Co-operation rather than co-optation has become a key mechanism by which reform projects are introduced and implemented.

In addition, to suggest that local communities are simply the dupes of networks or organizations with more expertise than themselves is to negate the considerable agency that they often bring to processes of governance. As Elwood's (2006) work with a community-based organization in Chicago demonstrates, even places that are apparently impoverished either in terms of material resources or technical knowledge can be extremely savvy and strategic in their dealings with public or private organizations that are intervening in their communities. Thus, as Fyfe's above observation (2005) regarding the delicate balance between soliciting more organic community involvement and professionalizing local governance structures suggests, there is considerable tension and uncertainty involved in creating and implementing local structures for facilitating the introduction of neoliberal reforms.

Nevertheless, the "local" remains supreme as a space that enjoys considerable legitimacy in governance reforms. Within the language of school reform as well as other fields of social governance – welfare, for example – "local" is understood as a shifting collection of sites where

sovereignty lies: the school, the community, the family, and even the individual. As a consequence of the increasing emphasis given to discourses of responsibility and self-motivation as described in Chapter 1, all of these sites are heavily privileged as spaces with ultimate decision-making authority. Therefore, what the community decides is right for the community in terms of an education system is held as inviolable; what the parent decides for his or her child or children is the best possible educational situation is necessarily the best possible solution; and that which individuals who have demonstrated a capacity for self-discipline and entrepreneurial success decide is the most effective way to approach education governance is considered the most knowledgeable and actionable of all situations.

However, it is not *simply* the fact that the local scale is local that it is given this privilege; it is the local scale that has adopted the policy priorities of larger decision-making networks subscribing to choice- and market-based reform that are held up as exemplars of self-determination. For example, alternative education (such as that described in Chapter 2) and cooperative home schooling, two sectors that represent a considerable amount of all American students, are nevertheless largely ignored as possibilities for reforming the system as a whole, even though they are the result of considerable effort expended at “local” levels to determine the best educational fit for a group of students. In other words, choice-based school reform networks do not necessarily seek to empower local educational districts to devise strategies that best fit their own needs; rather, they attempt to use local buy-in in order to direct a maximum number of individual reform projects towards a common set of choice- and market-based educational principles. Schools and districts are encouraged to conform to these principles via the example of other schools and districts that have experienced success – in many cases real, material success – on the basis of choice-based reforms. If they in turn are successful, they will serve as examples

for yet more schools. If they fail, as in the case of Cleveland High School, they may simply be ignored by choice-based reform networks or they may be picked up by other aspects of the choice-based reform network (as was the case for Cleveland). In this latter case, though, the emphasis on local sovereignty that brought about the reform in the first place serves a dual purpose: the failure of an individual school is ascribed to local conditions, not inherent flaws in the principles themselves. Therefore, while elements of the reform process may be altered to reflect lessons learned in particular cases – as the Gates Foundation modified its granting strategies in response to the demise of Cleveland’s small schools program – the fundamental principles of choice-based school reform can go largely unchallenged.

Of course, such discourse does not go unchallenged. Just as the local serves as a site that can facilitate the introduction of choice-based reforms to a particular place, it can also serve as a rallying point for resistance to reform measures that are not appropriate for a particular place. For example, in Seattle the blog Seattle Education 2010 ([wordpress.seattleeducation2010.com](http://wordpress.seattleeducation2010.com)) is a forum that investigates and reports on the connections between the local school district, philanthropic organizations as well as political developments that demonstrate the effects of these connections. The Alternative Schools Coalition is another source of ideas that run counter to some of SPS’s homogenizing efforts and parental solidarity that can confront such efforts. Even though choice-based measures tend to dominate political and popular discussions about school reform, they are not inevitable nor omnipotent. Indeed, the very fact that they rely on local support and a local infrastructure for their realization points to their inherent instability.

My intention in this discussion is not to dismiss all choice-based education reform and the people that help bring it about as calculating and conniving; rather, it is to highlight that there is an unmistakable direction that a majority of school reform efforts are taking, and this general

direction is facilitated through a multiplicity of local sites conforming, one way or another, to a common set of choice- and market-based principles. Some of these principles have led to real and undeniable gains in educational outcomes for students and a rise in the quality of education in certain places. What I contest is not these principles or their practitioners *per se*; rather, I want to understand why it is that there is a considerable convergence in both practice and discourse among an increasing number of sites widely separated by distance and socio-economic circumstance. I believe that the ideological privilege lent to local sites of authority and decision-making is one reason for this, and that we should question this privilege, especially when not all places are equally able to take advantage of it or consistently fail to achieve despite their purported sovereignty. In the conclusion that follows, I outline some of the theoretical directions that can motivate this line of questioning.

## Conclusion: Beyond choice-based school reform

### **I. The children left behind – the lived experience of school reform**

This work has outlined three theoretical lines of thought that illuminate some of the trends occurring within education reform that both reflect and inform larger trends in the transformation of social governance currently occurring in the industrialized West. Taken together, they provide a basis for understanding the connections being forged between districts, parents, students, nonprofit organizations, municipalities, corporate philanthropy, and the other actors in the bewildering array of networks implicated in the ongoing effort to reform education in the United States. The individual subjectivities of parents, children, and families are being reshaped to reflect a new set of criterion for citizenship that emphasizes self-motivation, active participation in choice-based education regimes, and a rejection of state-sponsored solutions for education. Urban regions are being reimagined as moral communities of reform in order to delimit the legitimacy of particular actors involved in reform efforts. And the local scale – schools, districts, and communities – are being privileged as sites where reform initiatives are to be carried out, tested, and evaluated by the education reform knowledge-making apparatus before being transferred to other places.

However, this theoretical framework is only a beginning. What it cannot explain is the particular experience of individual places as they are drawn into processes of school reform, evaluated, and ultimately accepted or rejected as sites of successful projects. As innovations are elaborated in school reform, the transfer of resulting developments in policy from place to place is not a smooth process. Not all cities, districts, and schools have equal access to the information and funding networks from which reform initiatives flow. As Gough's notion of the socialization of urban policy coalitions described in chapter 2 highlights, it is as much through serendipity and

personal connections between practitioners as through formal channels of professional knowledge dissemination that projects of reform are spread and taken up across space. Within such an environment, some schools and districts will remain perpetually cut off from the mechanisms of choice-based school reform – particularly funding and technical expertise – even as they remain subject to discourses about the failure of the public system – their own failure – to provide quality education and the inevitability of private alternatives. The networks that do form across places do not spread out evenly, but choose their sites of intervention carefully based on the local presence of willing partners and social and financial capital. As Peck and Theodore (2010b) note in the context of the movement of cash transfer programs from Mexico to New York City, the landscape of policy transfer is highly uneven:

In this environment [of policy transfer between countries], policy models are moving, at accelerated speed, through transnational networks; new forms of relational connectivity are being established between distant zones of experimentation. But this is not to say, it is important to reiterate, that some incipient trend towards convergence is at work. Uneven geographical development will remain a pronounced feature of the (unsettled) postwelfare landscape. But there can be no doubt that canalized forms of transnational policy learning—enabled by technocratic evaluation routines, expert networks, and epistemic communities of practice, embedded within tight ideologically parameters—are playing heightened roles in animating this landscape (206).

This unevenness in social policy transfer across space remains especially undertheorized in the context of education reform. Although the rhetoric of the choice-based school reform movement is predicated on the maxim that “no child is left behind” (whether verbatim or implicit), there is a need to understand how the places and the students who *are* left behind by reform projects fit into the overall landscape of the reform movement. Currently, this is an open question. This will necessarily require attention to the schools and children “left behind” by reform efforts. As important as sites where reform is being carried out are in determining overall shape of the choice-based reform movement, so too are sites where reform is *not* occurring important in understanding both the social-cultural and political-economic logics that are driving reform processes.

I have some suggestions for pursuing this question further. Holloway *et al.* (2010) emphasize the importance of paying careful attention to the lives and experiences of students themselves as *subjects* who hold agency within processes of education reform rather than being simply passive recipients of reform processes. This suggests the need for ethnographic work in schools and classrooms that can connect those schools and classrooms to the broader trends beyond their walls and back again. At the same time I remain sensitive to Roy's (2010) suggestion that the policies that make processes of reform work be studied in the places where they are made and elaborated – that is, in the centers of power that articulate visions for school reform that are disseminated to across space. I argue therefore that bridging the social-cultural impacts of education reform (which Holloway *et al.* privilege in their vision for future research) and the political-economic aspects of policy networks and urban entrepreneurialism that are driving process of school reform is essential for fully understanding the new forms of governance that are emerging in a period of economic crisis and restructuring.

## **II. A care-based ethics of school reform**

In the midst of intense political struggle over the future of the American public school system, those who are “on the ground” – students, parents, teachers, support staff, and administrators – return daily to the fundamental work of learning and teaching even as resources fluctuate, job security wavers, and the question of whether the work involved is worthwhile remains open. As has been seen in the examples throughout this work, school choice campaigns typically variously depict each of these groups as occupying positions of deprivation, privilege, vulnerability, power, disadvantage, or advantage, depending on the political goals of the particular movement. There is no doubt that certain groups *are* disadvantaged in the context of

school reform, especially communities of color to whom reform projects, particularly charter schools, are directed and marketed. Certain coalitions of parents and administrators are able to attract the attention of corporate philanthropy and Federal funding while certain others are left by the wayside. Powerful interests are best able to project their visions for the reform of the public education sector while the needs of some families, students, and communities go unmet.

At the same time, there is no doubt that even within the context of an education reform system that instrumentalizes non-market logics of solidarity and draws affective community ties into processes of school reorganization that privilege efficiency and accountability, the people involved in these transformations do *care* about the work they do and the outcomes their work will produce for students. Any analysis of the impacts of school reform efforts, whether they be choice-based or not, must recognize the daily caring work that goes into educating children as a fundamental aspect of education. The deeply unequal opportunities available to students across space motivate much of the work that is done to try to alleviate historically entrenched structures of racism and poverty. Whether the practitioners of reform work are aware of it or not, their efforts are often embedded in what Massey (2004) terms “geographies of responsibility” that implicitly or explicitly address the connections between places that have led to a highly uneven landscape of quality and opportunity within education. That reform efforts are driven by corporate philanthropy or choice-based schemes does not necessarily make them cynical or reducible to strategies for the further accumulation of capital. However, I argue that they do lead to a certain parochial attitude that celebrates individual school reform successes without considering how success in one place is constituted by an assemblage of failures elsewhere. To use one example, the current state of Seattle-area schools cannot be understood without reference to patterns of residential gentrification and segregation that have relegated underprivileged

populations to certain parts of the city proper (as in the case of the relatively impoverished neighborhoods of color surrounding Cleveland High School, for example) or outside the city itself to landscapes of suburban poverty (as in the case of Tyee High School, located in the heavily impoverished municipality of SeaTac to Seattle's south). There remains too an entire history to be investigated with regards to the white flight that effectively halved the city's school-age population during the 1970s and practices of redlining that in some cases explicitly segregated certain neighborhoods and left legacies of chronic impoverishment in its wake.

Although I have argued that a certain moral imagination of metropolitan areas serves to concentrate school reform efforts and philanthropic capital in the space of the greater Seattle area, this imagination itself is highly uneven and elides historic patterns of privilege, casting the entire metropolitan area as a level playing surface within which all schools have equal access to human and financial capital. Massey's argument similarly makes the point that privileged places that draw on a wide range of extralocal resources to create their privilege are paradoxically marked by a certain parochialism that ignores the origin of these resources and how they are unevenly distributed across space. As school reform efforts celebrate the unique characteristics of individual places where success has been achieved, they risk ignoring how the uneven distribution of resources across space fosters success in some places while blocking it in others.

However, there can and should exist normative evaluations of different school reform efforts. As has been seen in this work, such evaluations may require a fundamentally different understanding of what values should lie at the heart of efforts to produce a better and more responsive public education system that can accommodate all children and all families: being community-based or grassroots-organized does not automatically grant a reform initiative immunity from criticism, nor should the intervention of the private sector be immediately

condemned. Following Tronto's (1999) reframing of the terms of citizenship along the lines of the necessary and ongoing work of care in the reproduction of members of society, education reform efforts could be evaluated based on their responsiveness to the needs of the children and families who are affected by them. Further, recentering care within education reform would mean placing those who do the most direct and difficult work of care – teachers, aides, nurses, special educators – at the center of reform efforts and foregrounding their expertise gained through their daily experience.

Explicitly tracing the geographies of responsibility implicated in school reform processes would likewise provide a point of entry for refocusing attention on the daily lived experience of teachers, administrators, and students. As mentioned above, the sites where reform is *not* carried out nevertheless experience the impact of school reform initiatives through evaluation metrics that situate them as abject sites of failure. As long as the resources dedicated to school reform are competitively awarded, it will be those places that are best able to present themselves within logics of active citizenship, urban moral geographies, and local autonomous governance that will emerge winners. While this work has offered explanations for *how* these logics operate to foster processes of school reform, it cannot fully explain *why* certain places are better equipped to operate within these logics than others. Exploring the characteristics of individual places will be of vital importance for understanding the uneven effects of reform efforts across space. At the same time, I offer an alternative perspective that encourages both researchers and policy-makers to look at sites of choice-based school reform relationally rather than as atomized units with discrete, space-bounded characteristics. This work would consider the flows of funding and advocacy from place to place and seek out the “blind spots” of the choice-based reform imagination. From this perspective, we can not only begin to interrogate the decision-making

processes that ignore some places, families, and schools, but also investigate what these forgotten places do in the meantime to cope with the day-to-day caring work of education.

### **III. Contesting the inevitability of neoliberalism**

This work has dealt at length with a phenomenon that is so often studied and cited that it has become ubiquitous as a topic in critical social science: neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a tricky concept to discuss productively; on the one hand, changes that have occurred in global and national political economies since the late 1970s can be empirically linked to fundamental shifts in governance that have produced concrete and profound effects for the vast majority of the world's population. On the other hand, an excess of literature about neoliberalism and an impulse among scholars to link the ideological roots of every recent social and political phenomenon to a single neoliberal "blueprint" has given the phenomenon more substance and agency than is due to it. Consequently, even critical observers have in many ways unwittingly reproduced Margaret Thatcher's infamous utterance, "there is no alternative," by imagining that all economic and political life is under the control of a disembodied, omnipotent force called "neoliberalism." It has recently become difficult to image, much less identify, alternative systems of economic and political organization.

Several scholars have, however, contested the inevitability of neoliberalism by highlighting cases of social and economic life that are organized outside neoliberal ideas and casting these cases not as exceptions but as the seeds of possible paradigm shifts. This area of scholarship is too large and diverse for me to adequately do justice to here (though see Gibson-Graham 2006, for just a few examples), but I want to make the point that although my perspectives on education reform discussed in this work are built upon an excavation of the

evolution of different neoliberal trends (i.e. individual entrepreneurship, inter-urban competition, and local responsabilization), they are not reducible to these trends or to any neoliberal “agenda.” As many authors have pointed out (e.g. Brenner and Theodore 2002a, 2002b; Peck 2001; Peck 2002), neoliberalism is not a single set of practices or ideas but more properly described as the *convergence* of practices of governance towards an ideal that is never reached. Indeed, what I have tried to describe in this work is as much the coordination of practices and ideas amongst the actors involved in education reform as the practices and ideas themselves. To recall Gough’s (2002) observation about the social element present in policy transfer, this coordination is a highly uneven process marked by serendipity, chance encounters, personal relationships, and other arbitrary contacts between various actors. I would argue that it is within these contacts that we as critical observers of neoliberal trends can gain some of the most valuable insight into the changes taking place that are fundamentally remaking our political and economic systems.

At the same, this is only one layer of research that will be needed to fully understand and evaluate how one of the most basic systems of democracy – education – is changing. To contest the idea that neoliberalism is an inevitable force crushing all that stand in its path, we must not only refuse to reify it as such in our investigations, we must also investigate the alternatives, the moments of resistance, and the ambiguities that are strewn throughout the overall hegemony of neoliberal ideas. Some of these moments lie at the very heart of neoliberal knowledge-making itself; others are found within the marginalized spaces that neoliberal reform has ignored or discarded. They all, however, have a role to play in telling the story of the future of our political system, our economy, and our world.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Gates Foundation donations to the League of Education Voters, 2002 – 2010

Year	Grantee Name	Topic	Program	Amount
2010	League of Education Voters Foundation	Community Grants (U.S.)	United States	\$105,000
2010	League of Education Voters Foundation	Community Grants (U.S.)	United States	\$40,000
2009	League of Education Voters Foundation	College-Ready Education (U.S.)	United States	\$1,500,000
2007	League of Education Voters Foundation	Advocacy & Public Policy	United States	\$835,071
2006	League of Education Voters Foundation	Advocacy & Public Policy	United States	\$150,000
2003	League of Education Voters Foundation	College-Ready Education (U.S.)	United States	\$500,000
2002	League of Education Voters Foundation	Research & Development	United States	\$100,000

Source: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/grants/Pages/search.aspx>

## Appendix B: Sample interview script

Welcome; introduction

- a. Interviewee informed of the object of the research: to determine the institutional relationships and interactions at the heart of education policy in the Seattle metro region
- b. Interviewee informed of measures taken to protect confidentiality
- c. Interviewee asked if they have any questions for the interviewer
- d. Interview potential questions:
  - What was/is your role in (organization/initiative)?
  - With whom did you work at (organization) to achieve the goals of (project)?
  - What criteria did your organization provide in order to determine the effectiveness of (project)? What outcomes were desired?
  - What members of the public were involved in the execution of (project/initiative)? What criteria were used to determine who would be involved? What steps were taken to contact them and maintain their involvement?
  - How did your organization modify its procedures as a result of the outcome of (initiative)?
- e. Interviewee asked if there is anything they want to add or clarify