# A Teacher's Guide to Neoliberalism

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Abstract: *Each year, teachers in the United States find themselves in an increasingly defensive position. They work in underfunded school districts, are often underpaid, and they find their long-term prospects for employment dwindling as municipalities in economically distressed regions close schools and various movements seek to privatize public education—either by privatizing schools themselves or by privatizing the delivery of instruction through digital and cloud-based technologies. This confluence of threats, often simply referred to as "school reform", is, in actuality, an instance of the economic theory of neoliberalism. This article focuses on the ways in which the economic rationality of neoliberalism influences a variety of stakeholders in the public school system: students, teachers, school administrators, and the public as such. In each instance, it presents a critical engagement with neoliberal reformist ideology and offers educators practical strategies for asserting their professional value in the current political and economic climate.*

# A Teacher's Guide to Neoliberalism

This profession is changing. The jobs for which we are training our students don't exist yet. Successful teaching occurs when it is as if the teacher isn't in the room at all. These are the slogans with which teachers are frequently confronted when they step into school at the beginning of a new academic year, or when they enter a training session with one of the many education gurus who are making their way through an ever-expanding public school speaking circuit. Though the pseudo-scientific jargon with which these gurus and experts substantiate their claims is poorly articulated and often superficial, their message is fundamentally correct. The profession of teaching is changing, and this change goes beyond the scope of what is typically addressed in teacher training programs and school faculty meetings. New pedagogy is replacing "traditional" instruction, classroom materials and practices are being shifted into the cloud, and the specter of mass privatization threatens the ideals of public education and the place of the teacher in society.

The response of educators across the country has been by-and-large one of continual adaptation—accepting what is often presented as an uncontrollable political reality to be a "natural cause" for the increasingly precarious role of the teacher within the school, the local community, and society itself. Unions, where they still exist, restrict themselves to issues of workplace safety and compensation while they fight a rearguard battle to protect the salaries and pensions of their members in a time of slowly dwindling public budgets. On the state and national level, moreover, they have failed to formulate and communicate a consistent methodological and intellectual rebuke to the powers that consciously shape public opinion in a way that continually delegitimizes teaching as a profession. In the mainstream media and on social networks, the few voices that speak in support of teachers and public education are drowned out by the torrent of demands for reform. Given this seemingly impossible set of circumstances, it is natural for teachers to want to retreat into the nuances of their subject matter and focus on the more immediate concerns of their professional lives. From within this self-curated cocoon of relative comfort, it is easy to perceive the existential threats that are amassing on the horizon of public education as distant and uncertain, but this is a dangerous misapprehension. The profession of teaching has reached an inflection point, and now it must decide how it will encounter (or, counter) a future in which the guarantee of a job is far from certain.

This uncertainty, however, is not just the result of increasing demands placed on teachers, the technological transformation of the classroom, or constant imperative to do more with less. It is, in greater measure, the institutional manifestation of the neoliberalism- the dominant political and economic ideology the United States. This paper seeks to offer a theoretical intervention within the school reform debate by examining public education within the framework of the political economy, with specific reference to the economic model of neoliberalism, in an attempt to illuminate how and to what extent this ideology is reshaping the practice of teaching. In doing so, I am consciously borrowing a strategy from the gurus whom I just mentioned, which is to say that, if it is an acknowledged and politically acceptable practice to analyze the public school from within a specific explanatory model—be it one of neuroscience, management theory, behavioral psychology, Silicon Valley futurism—then I am simply extending this technique to the perspective of political economy.

**What is Neoliberalism?**

Neoliberalism is one of the most hotly debated political and economic concepts in the world today. The very use of the word is so charged with controversy that, in some circles, it reveals one's political leanings the moment it is spoken. The term, to be clear, has nothing to do with the use of the word "liberal" in popular American political discourse, and instead refers to the political and institutional implementation of neoclassical economic theory beginning in the 1970s and 1980s (most famously during the governments of Ronald Reagan in the U.S. and Margaret Thatcher in the U.K.). Beyond this rather rudimentary point, the

term has undergone broad shifts in meaning and has served as the basis of an incredibly wide-ranging amount of academic research, most notably since 2007.[1] Indeed, entire dissertations could be written on the evolution of the term in modern political science and economic scholarship, to say nothing of the copious academic work, beginning in 1947, that contributed to neoliberalism's ascendancy, without ever naming it as such. [2]

David Harvey, in his seminal study A *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, offers perhaps the most concise definition: "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political and economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade".[3] This conjoining of individual with entrepreneurial freedom forms the basis of an ideological program that seeks, in Harvey's view, to co-opt common-sense notions of "the good life"(happiness, autonomy, opportunity, reason, etc.) into a program of progressive economic deregulation and privatization.[4] Once this occurs, the stage is set for any number of modifications to and abstractions from traditional notions of democratic self-determination once thought to be unassailable in Western democracies. For Harvey, the primary alteration is a movement from industrial capitalism, in which consumable goods are produced and sold for profit, to a highly financialized economy in which profit is derived through a process of "accumulation by dispossession," which, in broad terms, seeks to extract profit from citizens through increasingly complex rent-seeking mechanisms.[5]

Wendy Brown, in her 2014 book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, describes the social costs of this process when she argues that, "neoliberal rationality disseminates *the model of the market* to all domains and activities—even where money is not an issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus.*"[6] The individual—redefined not as a subject but as a collection of economic motives, ceases to be a democratic citizen capable of expressing meaningful political agency—instead becomes a mere instance of human capital, whose sole purpose is to appreciate in marketable value. Brown laments, "Whether through social media 'followers,' 'likes,' and 'retweets,' through rankings and ratings for every activity and domain, or through more directly monetized practices, the pursuit of education, training, leisure, reproduction, consumption, and more are increasingly configured as strategic decisions and practices related to enhancing the self's future value."[7]

This threat to democratic agency is communicated with equal clarity and precision in the field of mainstream economics itself, with Thomas Picketty's recently popular *Capital in the 21st Century* offering an exhaustive quantitative study of global income inequality and its effects on overall economic and political stability. Equally prescient in its analysis, but significantly less popular in the Anglophone world, is Wolfgang Streeck's *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. In it, Streeck eloquently outlines an emerging political and economic distinction in Western democracies between civic and financial interests, which he terms as a divide between a citizens' constituency (*Staatsvolk*) and a market constituency (*Marktvolk*).[8] The citizens' constituency consists of tax paying members of a given nation-state who tacitly agree to taxation in exchange for democratic agency within the state. They expect, through regular and fair elections, to influence the political orientation and direction of their country.[9] The market constituency, in

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[1] While it is impossible to offer a comprehensive account of the term here, I have restricted myself to what I believe are the most salient models for a theoretical discussion of neoliberalism in the public school system.

[2] The date to which I am referring is the founding of the Mont Pelerin Society by Friedrich Hayek on 4/8/47, an economic think-tank that was, by many accounts, responsible for beginning the programmatic articulation of economic liberalization that later scholars named as neoliberalism.

[3] D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007)., 2.

[4] Ibid., 39-46

[5] Ibid.,160-166. Rent-seeking, briefly described, is a process through which an economic actor (an individual, corporation, or institution) uses asymmetries in information, resources, and political influence to extract continual profits from a populace by restricting and monetizing its access to a good or service.

[6] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (MIT Press, 2015), 31.

[7] Ibid., 34

[8] Wolfgang Streek, *Gekaufte Zeit - Die vertagte Krise des demokratischen Kapitalismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkampf, 2015)., 118-122.

[9] Ibid., 118.

contrast, has a contractual relationship to the nation-state and is not bound exclusively to its domestic politics (or, in fact, to its geographic boarders). It demands the enforceability of contracts in the realm of private law and expresses its will through legal demands on the state.[10] The problem, as Streeck develops it over the course of the book, is that both communities of citizens develop such divergent and competing interests, that the nation-state can no longer serve both groups equally.[11] As it becomes increasingly unable to provide the services expected of liberal democracies since World War II, the nation-state is forced to incur debts, structured by financial markets, to make up for the lost tax revenues needed to cover their obligation to provide key social provisions (pensions, health care, social security, etc.). Debt service, therefore, becomes an increasing priority that binds the state more tightly to the interests of the market constituency, such that its legal responsibility to this group supersedes its political responsibility to its own citizens. Through a process of continual debt and debt service, policy directives, and market circumstances derived from the inherent contradictions of neoliberal economics, nation-states continually push potentially devastating economic crises into the future—crises that will eventually force Western governments either to reconcile their obligations to both constituencies or risk abandoning democratic principles altogether.[12]

How, then, is an extremely brief survey of three selected accounts of neoliberalism applicable to an analysis of the public-school system in the United States? One could, as previously mentioned, find numerous studies about the effect of neoliberal economics on public institutions, many with a clear focus and illuminating quantitative research on public schools, their finances, and their educational outcomes.[13] The three authors, however, whom I have chosen to elucidate the theory of neoliberalism and, later, will use as a basis for evaluating the threat of neoliberal rationality to public schools and education itself, offer a view of the phenomenon on three distinct levels that intersect, in disturbing and fascinating ways, within the public school system. Harvey provides a now canonical account of the history, mentality, and operational logic of the neoliberal order; Streeck offers a historical, macroeconomic analysis of the structural contradictions of the public sector in Western democracies, and Brown provides a moving account of how these contradictions operate on both an institutional and personal level. Schools are a paradigmatic example of an institution rooted in the values and expectations of a citizens' constituency (*Staatsvolk*), and an accessible and intellectually vibrant public school system has always been an indispensable prerequisite for participation in a functional democracy. As the demands of the market constituency (*Marktvolk*) impinge on the nation-state's ability to finance effective public education, numerous attempts will be made to radically alter the institutional form of the school (through the expansion of charter schools, magnet schools, vouchers, etc.) and these shifts, coupled with an increasing amount of reform on the curricular level, will be increasingly imbued with the tactics and values of neoliberalism presented in Harvey's book.[14] Neoliberal reforms will seek to discipline organized labor within the schools, decentralize instruction, and create new markets for consumer electronics and digital "content providers" within the classroom.[15] A major effect of these attempts at transforming public education will likely correspond disturbingly with Wendy Brown's account of the neoliberal penchant for viewing students not as people but simply as human capital, which has alarming implications for the quality of education that the United States may offer to its students in a future of deregulated schools and denatured instructional standards.

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[10] Ibid., 119. 0

[11] There is an English translation available of Streek's book, but I only had access to the German original at the time of this writing. Although I have rendered the terms *Staatsvolk* and *Marktvolk* as constituencies, it is important to note that the word *Volk* in German communicates a stronger sense of human community than does the word constituency in English. This valence is central to Streeck's argument. Far from being a technical description of a group of people based on commonly shared political and economic interests, *Volk* is a term that implies a shared, human destiny.

[12] Recent events in Greece and Puerto Rico suggest the direction such reconciliations will likely take.

[13] The work of Dianne Ravitch comes to mind. See: Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education.* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

[14] One can only assume that this process will intensify under new Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos.

[15] While I have focused on the theoretical and quantitative analysis in Streek's 2015 study, the introduction of his new book offers a concise, powerful summary of these arguments. See: Wolfgang Streek, *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failed System* (London: Verso Books, 2016), 1-46.

Readers with a deep knowledge of modern economic theory may object to my choice of authors on the grounds that they are too reactionary in their writing or too limited in the amount of quantitative research they incorporate into their work. I would counter this objection by referring readers to the enormous amount of contemporary, quantitative research by other economists which support a good number of the arguments made in these books. Indeed, the academy has been so thorough in its documentation and analysis of neoliberalism that, to a specialist audience, these authors present arguments that are more common sense than controversial. And yet, it is my belief that the work of Harvey, Brown, and Streeck are absolutely essential for cultivating a broader understanding of what is at stake for the future of public education in the United States. Many of us perceive the logic of neoliberalism as the soft tug of systemic injustice, as a looming sense that something is "off" in our world, but we all too often turn away from these thoughts and reaffirm the comforting belief these intuitions are the result of a passing disturbance in an otherwise rational social order. As educators, we can no longer allow ourselves this luxury. If, as Margaret Thatcher, claimed, "Economics are the method: The goal is to change the heart and soul," then it is professionally irresponsible and politically ill-advised to ignore the effects of economics, and the politics that support them, on the institutions that shape our children's lives.[16]

**The School Building**

An overview of the ways in which neoliberalism functions within a school district must necessarily begin by examining the physical space of the school. The average age of a school building in the United States is 42 years, according to the most recent data available.[17] In the 18 years since this study was published, it is fair to assume that the structural integrity of America's school buildings have significantly degraded, even if some of these buildings have been retrofitted with newer technologies and amenities. When teachers and students enter a school, they are, in many cases, entering a building built during the baby-boom years of 1950-1969, and must deal with the typical difficulties associated with such a structure. It is not uncommon for school rooms to suffer from inadequate ventilation, lack of effective climate control, bug and mice infestations, flooding, collapsing ceiling tiles—to name but a few common issues in an aging school. Reductions and consolidation in maintenance and IT staff frequently result in slow response times to problems that limit instructional effectiveness, while diminishing local tax levies and dwindling state and federal funding make significant renovations, retrofitting, and expansions impossible for many districts across the country. With the cost of new school construction reaching tens of millions of dollars nationally, it is unlikely that these aging structures will be replaced with newer buildings anytime in the near future.[18]

While a modern building is by no means necessary for successfully educating children, a degraded or insufficient structure often places undue stresses on those who work and learn in these facilities. Beyond this, however, political neglect of important civic infrastructure is a signal of the degree to which these institutions are valued in the public and private spheres. One of the hallmarks of a highly financialized, neoliberal economy is a deliberate neglect of public infrastructure and a general unwillingness to use public works projects as a means of creating jobs which, in the case of schools, would be doubly productive in their economic and social benefits. In fact, as Wolfgang Streek points out in a recent essay on the politics of debt consolidation, private companies have used the serial underinvestment in public infrastructure and the perceived boringness and standardization in the public provision of services as a means of making their

[16] "Interview for Sunday Times | Margaret Thatcher Foundation," accessed May 15, 2017, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104475.
[17] Lewis, Laurie; Snow, Kyle; Farris, Elizabeth; Condition of America's Public School Facilities: 1999, p. 37 Functional Age of Schools, National Center for Education Statistics, June 2000;http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000032.pdf
[18] Though it is difficult to find an accurate national yearly average for school construction costs in the United States, a cursory search of public records for districts across the country that have built new schools over the past 10 years reveals costs (labor, materials, and land values) of $20-$60 million or more, depending on location.

products more attractive.[19] In the face of rotting, underfunded and understaffed public schools, private options with adequate funding will naturally look like better, more efficient alternatives.

If, for example, the federal government or state governments were to create a public works initiative with a focus on renovating, modernizing, and—in cases of acute necessity—building public schools, they could offer gainful employment to America's vast unemployed and underemployed populations, giving them much needed income and allowing them to build wide variety of skills that could be transitioned into other industries. In the process, the wages paid in such an initiative would contribute to a broader economic stimulus and a real recovery from the aftershocks of the financial crisis of 2007/2008.[20] Yet the very nature of such a proposal is completely anathema to the logic of neoliberal building projects, which seek instead to privatize and monetize common spaces and public infrastructure, rather than use them for vehicles of social and economic mobility. In a society that can produce grand structures like 432 Park Avenue in New York City—structures which are in equal measure financial instruments for the super-rich, monuments to conspicuous consumption and, in reality, spaces that remain vacant for most of the year—it should strike the public as at least curious that more money cannot be found to modernize public schools. This fundamental contradiction in priorities is not lost on students, who are frequently told that they are America's "greatest resource" and the "future of the country," while they sit in buildings which are falling apart around them.

**Students**

It is beyond the scope of this paper to question how, or even if, neoliberalism structures the psychological development of children. To make such a claim would require a very nuanced understanding of human psychology in order to avoid overtones of crude reductionism and, even then, it might seem suspect to posit that a singular theory could broadly influence a variety of psychological processes. I will instead focus on how neoliberal ideology attempts to influence the instructional and institutional practices with which students come into contact on a daily basis. This is very much in keeping with the character of how neoliberal thinkers have traditionally expanded the reach of their ideas: The goal was always to shape institutions first, and hope that these institutions would, in turn, shape people. Public schools are a fascinating example of this approach because they are, in effect, one of the last sets of public institutions to be selected for intensive neoliberal reform and, as a result, are being subjected to a very refined version of an established reformist agenda. At the same time, however, schools present a very difficult target for reformers, because traditional reform strategies are not fully applicable to them: Schools cannot be moved overseas. Teachers' jobs cannot, broadly speaking, be outsourced to cheaper foreign labor pools. Teachers unions, though weakened since the 70s and 80s, still have enough members to exert a mild political influence in states without right to work laws. Schools and school districts are also not mandated to "increase shareholder value" in the same manner as businesses, and thus cannot undergo operational restructuring in the same manner and at the same pace as publicly traded companies. There is, of course, the imperative to provide value to the tax payer, but this is usually not pursued to the point of cost-cutting policies that rob children, in a practical sense, of their right to a free, local education (though some municipalities in the U.S., I am sure, would argue that their situations come very close to such a state of deprivation). At the end of the day, however, communities need schools, and will therefore fund them and their workforce to some degree. Society at large will always need to educate children and will have to invest in doing so, which means paying for physical infrastructure, paying wages to instructional staff, and paying for instructional materials—regardless of whether the institutions themselves maintain their public status or are privatized.

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[19] See: Wolfgang Streek, *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failed System* (London: Verso Books, 2016), 95-112.

[20] Yes, this is a blatantly Keynesian position, but it has worked in the past and, even if it isn't a cure-all for our economic ills, it would still offer generations of children a lasting benefit in their pursuit of an education.

The main goal of the reform movement has thus been to redefine the role of the student, both epistemically and pedagogically, and to use this supposedly new understanding of student learning to create deep and disruptive structural changes to the school as an institution. The strategy can be crudely described as follows: Technology is fundamentally changing how children engage with the world around them. This change corresponds to and enhances "natural" learning processes within children that "traditional" schools and "traditional" pedagogy have historically neglected. It is therefore necessary to radically change the way schools work, through adopting new technological infrastructures and new pedagogies that assign to students the role of generating, cultivating, and transmitting knowledge on their own accord. Reductive as this presentation of the position may seem, it is useful to unpack it systematically in order to better understand what is at stake in neoliberal educational reforms.

Let us therefore begin with the first two claims. Anyone who has had even the most casual contact with children during the past ten years will certainly have noticed their increasingly passionate attachment to "smart" devices, be they smartphones, tablets, game consoles, traditional PCs, etc. These devices offer children a simple and persistent mechanism for extending their interests beyond their immediate circumstances and, all too frequently, ignoring or escaping their surroundings. Whereas, in the past, schools offered students a place separate and distinct from their interests and personal pursuits and forced them to focus on specific concepts and ideas, the prevalence of digital technology in the school has provided them with the ability to cognitively detach from the proceedings in the classroom or in the school in general, often in the name of offering students choice in what and how they learn.[21] Education gurus and school administrators increasingly frame this problem as one of "engagement." If students find the consumption of digital content more engaging than traditional school instruction, then it seems, in their view, logical to transform instruction so that curricula "migrate to the cloud," lessons "reach students where they are," and teachers "leverage digital assets to drive engagement."

The result is a gradual yet persistent restructuring of the student experience. Every moment of free time devolves into a digital play session, computer-based assignments give students an opportunity for consistent distraction which is harder to detect, and, most importantly, screen time slowly displaces opportunities for dialogic instruction and peer interaction. The ability of "smart" devices to both structure and measure student attention is incorrectly used as evidence to render a verdict on lessons and curricula: If, through the use of software programs that monitor and record student activity, it can be shown that students would rather play a game than write an essay, then the value of essays as instructional tools might be called into question. If a student would rather play a game, why not "gamify" the act of writing? Such is the logic that is treating the transmission of knowledge as just another form of digital content consumption, and transforming the school from a site of intellectual independence and authority into the physical manifestation of infotainment.

Student attention and concentration, however, are imperfect measures of the success of a lesson, curriculum, or school. As any examination of the practical history of teaching will reveal, students have always needed to cultivate attention and intellectual focus throughout the course of their K-12 education. A great lesson taught to an audience that has not developed these skills will produce minimal engagement, just as certain subjects force one to practice repetitive concepts and skills to serve as a foundation for more meaningful intellectual exploration. Just because, given the choice between completing a math worksheet and watching a YouTube video, many students would choose the latter, does not in and of itself constitute evidence that math instruction will be fundamentally more effective if delivered on YouTube. The cultivation of concentration, as well as subject-matter knowledge itself, has traditionally required a bit of emotional discomfort on the part of the learner. The transition from ignorance to mastery was never intended to be an easy one, and the lessons learned from enduring the pain of uncertainty and the monotony of practice have, for years, been

[21] Choice is one of the key terms in neoliberal ideology. It is instructive to think about how arguments in favor of choice have negatively influenced the availability and efficiency of a wide variety of vital goods and services. Health care reform is one of the most recent and potentially devastating examples.

unquestionably considered vital in creating a person capable of absorbing and producing knowledge throughout the course of his or her life.

This process of maturation, at times, has to conflict with students' immediate wishes, and forcing them to engage in the acquisition of knowledge with focus and self-discipline has always been seen as one of the most important responsibilities of teachers and educational institutions. Throughout the history of Western education, this responsibility was surely enforced in too draconian a fashion and led to instances of institutional stagnation and conformity that did not respond to students' emotional needs, but this does not invalidate the need for the teacher to guide students through their subject matter with erudition and authority. By using digital technology to force the teacher into the role of a "facilitator"— responsible not for transmitting knowledge but simply for managing the organizational and technical infrastructure necessary for its dissemination, educational institutions are in danger of losing the fundamental humanist values that they have traditionally embodied. Schools were never just preparatory or "training" facilities, but rather have always played a crucial social and cultural role in the stewardship of knowledge and the cultivation of cross-generational mentorship. The relationship between student, teacher and institution was always, purposely, a dialectical one— one in which intellectual and methodological progress was the result of all three elements interacting in a dynamic, evolutionary process. By removing the role of the teacher from this system, students will be robbed of the human element of knowledge transmission.

Neoliberalism, however, needs to manage student attention and behavior through technical mediation if it is to remake public education into a paid commodity. Shifting the source of instruction to the cloud and utilizing devices to measure and aggregate different indicators of attention is crucial in dissolving this bond between teacher and student that has made public education an invaluable public good for the past one-hundred sixty plus years. It is the pedagogic equivalent of moving the factory abroad: "Content" is housed in digital form on a server of (in all likelihood) a private company, while teachers are shifted into the role of "learning coaches." Knowledge, now a commodity, is expropriated from the 3.1 million teachers in the United States and learning, previously an activity indissociable from the human act of teaching, becomes a process wholly internal to the student, the pace of which needs to be monitored by digital devices. The physical instructor, whose job could not really be exported to low wage zones like workers in other industries, instead has the most valuable component of his or her labor excised from his or her job, making the teacher into a physical presence in the classroom who possesses very little expertise compared to the wealth of information circulating in the cloud. In such an environment, there will be no incentive to pay teachers their current wages to simply "manage behavior." The school will instead be an instance of fixed capital, its labor force a low wage sector, and students will have the most valuable decisions concerning their education made by companies for which profit outweighs educational outcomes.

While this may sound like a doomsday scenario or simply "sour grapes" from a profession underperforming when compared to more efficient Silicon Valley alternatives, a brief consideration of the actual pedagogy underpinning this redefinition of teacher and student is deeply troubling. Perhaps the chief offender in this new frontier of reformist teaching practice is "blended learning," a concept touted, among many sources, by the Christensen Institute, a think-tank founded to apply Harvard Business School Professor Clayton Christensen's theory of "disruptive innovation" to health care, education and global development. According to the institute, blended learning can be defined as, "leveraging the Internet to afford each student a more personalized learning experience" and "a formal education program in which a student learns: at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace; at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home; and the modalities along each student's learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.[22]" Like related "disruptive" pedagogy such as the Danielson Framework for Teaching and "inquiry-based learning,"

[22] "Blended Learning." *Christensen Institute*. Accessed May 1, 2017. https://www.christenseninstitute.org/blended-learning/.

blended learning begins by ostensibly focusing on the student; crafting a curriculum that contextualizes knowledge into meaningful experiences and encourages the student to construct meaning rather than simply absorb it. Lessons are delivered through a mixture of digitally delivered content, small group instruction, and "rotations" that focus student attention on individual pieces of a lesson, often through a particular physical arrangement of the instructional space or the students' physical movement within the space. The one constant is the use of a digital device of some sort, be it a cellphone, laptop, or the increasingly ubiquitous Google Chromebook. Depending on how it is implemented, teachers will either upload their materials to shared, cloud-based storage systems or use online content purchased from a third party. Due to the mandate that the "blend space" sequence instruction in response to a student's individual learning style, it is often the latter option that is becoming the default choice, given that teachers often lack access to the technological infrastructure and the programming skills to individualize instruction for each of their students. Classrooms may be "flipped," with instructors recording direct instruction material for home consumption and designing problem-based group work in class. Still other classes may gamify the delivery of instructional material, having students compete in digital and physical games to, as it was put to me during a training session, simulate the reward mechanisms offered by video games.

Though this may seem like a hodge-podge collection of dubious ideas for educating children, the experts at the Christensen Institute conveniently point out that blended learning will look different in different settings and with different student populations. In fact, the rather sparse research into the efficacy of this approach in K-12 settings can also be explained away by the fluidity of the concept. According to Julia F. Freeland, Director of Education for Christensen, "When we rely on research for a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down, we don't actually research what educators and administrators really need to know. We don't need more studies that say, 'On average we see modest gains.' That doesn't help me as a teacher see whether those modest gains could occur for my students."[23] Similar rhetorical gymnastics are employed throughout much of the literature on the Christensen website, leading one to believe that blended learning encompasses everything teachers do, everything they don't do, but should, and everything they should stop doing and turn over to educational technology service providers. And it is this very conceptual amorphousness that allows it and similar pedagogical models to infest the talking points of the various gurus who gleefully portend the dawn of the "ed tech" era. It is a rhetoric that parrots a vocabulary of innovation, without the need for empirical evidence or critical reflection and, most tragically, forces a generation of children to suffer through these unproven instructional methodologies for the sake of a reform agenda that, at best, sees them as future labor inputs rather than as democratic citizens deserving an open, efficient, and effective public education.

**Teachers**

Teachers, for our part, have also been complicit in the forward march of neoliberal reform, though more often as the result of professional passivity rather than profit motive. We have, individually and collectively, failed to grasp the scope of the forces operating against us and have therefore, at best, put up a delayed, reactive defense to the reformist agenda. The unions that represent us have done no better in this regard, often choosing to engage solely with questions of compensation and less with establishing a broad, incisive intellectual authority within public debates on educational policy.

On one level, this is totally understandable, as a teachers' first and most important responsibility is to the children whom they teach, and this responsibility consumes more time than anyone outside of the profession realizes. While members of the public often deride teachers for "babysitting kids and having the summers off," they rarely see the hours of grading and planning that go on after the school day ends, the long meetings and tutoring sessions, and the field trips and weekend games that make up the yearly routine of

[23] Davis, Michelle. "Blended Learning Research: The Seven Studies You Need to Know." *Education Week - Digital Education*. Accessed May 1, 2017. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2015/04/blended_learning_research_the.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-FB.

those dedicated to the craft of teaching and to the communities in which the craft is practiced. Teachers are, moreover, often fundamentally compromised in their ability to do their job as effectively as possible by the numerous bureaucratic and social impasses that inhibit their efforts on a daily basis. As previously stated, a disproportionately large number of America's teachers teach in schools with inadequate facilities and materials. Many teach in communities that have experienced the devastating effects of systemic poverty, unemployment, and unequal access to the healthcare system, which leads to numerous disturbances in students' abilities to learn, to say nothing of the lingering threats to personal safety with which teachers and students are confronted on a daily basis. In wealthier districts, these concerns are diminished, but are often replaced with onerous amounts of paperwork, meetings, and training sessions that rob teachers of the time necessary to grade and plan lessons—realities which increase the amount of time "off of the clock" that teachers put in at home. New technologies, despite promising ease of use and prodigious amounts of saved time, are often used as administrative surveillance mechanisms that have added innumerable extra steps to once simple and straightforward tasks. Lesson planning and gradebook management, for example—rather than being concise narrative documents and efficient spreadsheets—have become expansive data entry fields, were each aspect of a plan or each assignment has to be linked to multiple sets of standards, transfer skills, and instructional differentiations. This is a process which can take up to 70 clicks per item, depending on the software platform and the district. Multiply this by 5 or 6 classes with an average of 26 students per class, and it is easy to see why teachers have not had the time or the inclination to engage with the larger political and economic dimensions of their profession.[24]

And yet these are the very issues that contribute to the burdens under which teachers struggle and which need to be reversed. Teachers no longer have the luxury of receding into the self-contained worlds of their classrooms if they wish to maintain the integrity of their profession, their own professional autonomy, and their long term prospects for employment. The social and intellectual fabric of the classrooms in which teachers work every day is slowly being dissolved around them and, if no consistent, organized intellectual and civic resistance is undertaken, the pace of this so-called creative destruction will escalate until the profession that many of us love is no longer recognizable. Long time teachers may object to this assessment and note the cyclical nature of educational initiatives and, while this point has a strong historical truth, it is one that is no longer applicable to the current political moment. In the past, reforms were aimed at transforming practice within the institution, whereas neoliberal reform seeks to transform the institution itself.

It is therefore imperative that educators fully understand the nature of this historical moment and use this knowledge to respond critically, consistently and constructively to the reform agenda. To do so, a further analysis of the economic logic of neoliberalism is helpful. We have already discussed how the role of the teacher is being concomitantly redefined by pseudoscientific pedagogy gurus and tech industry solutionists eager to reimagine the role of the student in the learning process.[25] Let us now turn our attention to another equally powerful way in which teachers are being assailed more directly by neoliberal rationality.

This assault is primarily political, incorporating both public discourse and state and local level budgeting battles, which help form the basis of what might be called a regime of intense professional legitimation crises that are being used to bend public institutions to the will of neoliberal reformers. This strategy essentially asks mid-level management to re-value the labor costs of an organization at a set interval (alternatively called value-added analysis or zero-based budgeting), thereby continually reducing everyone's contribution to an organization to nothing and forcing individuals and departments to constantly reassert their usefulness. At one level, this is a strictly financial tool, but it carries deep political implications within public institutions. It has allowed politicians to plant the idea in the minds of the public that teachers are over-valued in light of failing schools and the quickly dissolving promise of educational equality, and it has allowed arrogant school administrators to imitate their supposed corporate counterparts and impose

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[24] According to the most recent available data, the average class size in the 2011–2012 school year was 21.2 pupils for public elementary schools and 26.8 pupils for public secondary schools. See: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2015* (NCES 2016-014)

[25] I am borrowing the term "solutionist" from: E. Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (PublicAffairs, 2013).

draconian cost-cutting strategies where they are not needed. The response of teachers and their union representation to this logic is flawed, in that it relies on public and political acceptance of the humanist values of education that are being deliberately eroded by these forms of value-added analysis. Teachers are telling the public that teaching is an art, that they are selfless, dedicated professionals who want nothing more than to guide students to success, that they could not see themselves doing anything other than teaching and that, in the end, they deserve a fair shake. Now, while these statements about teachers are absolutely true, a political strategy built around them is doomed to failure in the current atmosphere of anti-intellectual and anti-union sentiment.

Rather than fight against this trend with the language of humanism, teachers would do well to embrace this logic and use it to their advantage. For example, let's begin by assuming a zero-based budgeting position (i.e., that the role of the teacher needs to be re-valued). What would be the baseline value of a teacher? I would suggest that, at the very least, teachers provide a very secure, very consistent form of day care (to borrow but one of the stereotypical reproaches of teachers). Let's take the state of New Jersey as an example. The average cost of day care in the state is between $9,170 and $10,949, although it can be somewhat higher in the state's wealthier counties.[26] While the cost of day care typically decreases as a child nears age 5, it is fair to assume that costs would then increase as a child gets older and has more intellectual, developmental, and social needs, meaning that teachers would naturally have to price their expertise at some level beyond day care. And one can see where this analysis will likely lead: The services teachers provide for the cost of a portion of property taxes are actually a better value than if these services were to be purchased on an open market. And even if competition were to drive down the overall cost of private school tuition or its "educational day care equivalent", the costs of fully privatized education would be borne by families already paying property taxes, adding an additional financial burden to American families already struggling under the weight of stagnating salaries and increasing living expenses. While teachers have always been privately cognizant of the value they add to their communities, framing the issue publicly, in quantitative and qualitative terms, will go a long way towards countering the forces that seek to devalue their work. Such a strategy has a greater chance of succeeding, because those who embrace instrumental reason and financialization have a very hard time dealing with analyses that are conducted from within their own analytical framework, but which produce contradictory results. Teachers' unions should hire an economist or a professional recruiter to study this subject and come up with a cost comparison between the current school funding models and a purely privatized model of education. The data that will be discovered by such a study will, in all likelihood, be an incredibly powerful political tool.

The logic of the legitimation crisis, however, often moves beyond its political dimension and takes root within teachers' self-understanding, coloring many of their daily decisions and subtly undermining their authority from within. This phenomenon manifests itself in a continual feeling of guilt, of not doing enough for one's students or being deficient in one or more aspects of one's professional responsibilities. While it is common for many long-time, successful teachers to question whether they've taught certain concepts effectively or review and alter their instruction based on reflective analysis and student/administrator feedback, this internalized guilt of the neoliberal legitimation crisis manifests itself differently—as a constant questioning of the value of the instruction one is offering, in feeling the need to assert the relevance of one's subject, and in assessing self-blame for classroom or social conditions beyond one's immediate control.[27] This constant psychological tension is frequently exploited by parents and administrators (and, recently,

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[26] "Map: The Average Cost for Child Care by State - The Boston Globe," *BostonGlobe.com*, accessed November 17, 2015, https://www.bostonglobe.com/2014/07/02/map-the-average-cost-for-child-care-state/LN65rSHXKNjr4eypyxT0WM/story.html.

[27] To take but one example, the concept of "differentiated instruction"— the idea that teachers need to identify individual student learning styles and craft individualized learning experiences based on these styles—gained traction about a decade ago and has rooted itself as a key concept within the vocabulary of modern pedagogy. Its popularity as an educational buzzword belies its true purpose—to mitigate the effects of large class sizes by making them a methodological problem for the teacher rather than a political problem for state and local governments. Whereas teachers will naturally accommodate different learning styles in a class of 10 or 15, a class of 30 students requires a completely different pedagogical approach if a curriculum is to be taught thoroughly and effectively.

students as well) to further their own agendas. Parents, for example, borrow the buzzwords of reformers to shift the blame for poor performance onto teachers for their "traditional methodologies" or their inability to sustain "engagement." Administrators organize numerous meetings and professional development sessions which are designed to address one or another of their staff's perceived deficiencies, while tech companies sell new software and hardware to districts with the promise of streamlining and enhancing instruction. Students have become better at blurring the lines between legitimate requests for clarification and critiquing an instructor's supposed lack of clarity, fairness, or motivation in order to garner extensions on assignments, extra credit, or assessment retakes.

It is this kind of overt blame-shifting within the school and outside of it that teachers have passively accepted as simply part of their jobs; but the more they are exposed to it, the more insidious it becomes and the more it compromises their professional autonomy. Teachers seem, in fact, to have accepted the unfounded assertion that there are disproportionately more substandard performers in teaching when compared to other professions, even though the most cursory of analyses of the past 15 years in American public life points to several other groups who have much more to answer for. The solution is not a disillusioned retreat into the comforts of curricular routine, nor is it a somber admission of culpability for the woes of the institution and an enthusiastic embrace of new reforms. The best thing we can do for our students and our profession is to confidently and defiantly assert the value of our work as subject area experts, and to refuse to allow our fields to be defined from the outside by people with little to no knowledge of the intellectual traditions to which we have devoted our lives. Automatically assuming professional deficiency is a disservice to everyone—especially to our students—and operates in many cases as a tacit agreement with the gurus who wish to paint the engaged, highly educated, and professionally autonomous classroom teacher as a relic of the past. This is not a call for stubborn adherence to past practice or a refusal to acknowledge the changes and challenges with which we are confronted, but rather a call for teachers to embrace what makes them great professionals: a passion for cultivating the intellectual and social development of children, an sense of embeddedness within the Western intellectual tradition, and the responsibility of mentoring students so that they can engage productively and democratically with their future societies.

**School Administration**

The individuals who find themselves in perhaps the most tenuous position within the neoliberal reshaping of the American school system are school administrators. While many teachers might find this assertion to be somewhat quizzical, a closer examination shows that, second only to students themselves, administrators have been selected as a key target of the neoliberal reform agenda. Much in the same way that neoliberalism has tried to transform the role of the school as an institution and, through this, transform the student, it has targeted administrators as natural allies in the implementation of its strategies. It has done so by exploiting a natural, almost reflexive instinct in the building administrator—an often laser-like focus on consistent, unquestioned implementation of district and state policies. While this sounds like a rather banal observation, I think long-time teachers will agree that one key trait of an effective principal or vice principal has traditionally been an unyielding professional dedication to making sure that a school runs effectively, in every sense of the word. Successful school administrators have always been masterful at maintaining the delicate balancing act between student needs, community needs, staff supervision and evaluation, and state mandated compliance issues (to name just a few of their numerous responsibilities). It is a truly demanding job and requires a tremendous commitment of time, flawless organizational abilities, and an acute, almost instinctive understanding of how all of the aforementioned responsibilities interact with each other and affect the environment within a school.

Neoliberal school reformers have thus enacted a two-fold strategy to coopt public school administrators. First, they have deliberately targeted their messaging and consulting activities at curriculum development specialists, school boards, and superintendents, knowing full well that once these stakeholders

approve specific reforms, school administrators will uncritically work to implement them as a matter of course. In fact, one might imagine instances of intense pushback if building administrators were approached directly with some of the more onerous aspects of school reform, such as an increasing volume of high-stakes testing that robs students of instructional time throughout the school year. By engaging with a level of management above principals, vice principals, and department chairs, the reform movement has banked on—and has largely succeeded in achieving—high levels of compliance without much critical backlash, just as they have done by manipulating the professional disposition of teachers to progress their agenda.

As the movement has evolved, so too has an aspirational managerialism among those in positions of power within school districts. Whereas the strategic planning happens at a level above that of building principals, the ethos of neoliberal workplace hierarchies have begun to infect schools themselves, with many administrators behaving as the public school equivalent of the CEO (following their charter school colleagues, who frequently adopt this title outright)—an arrogance and conceit that facilitates an even greater, uncritical acceptance of policies that are not always in the best interests of students. This has, moreover, also given rise to blindly ambitious careerism among younger administrators, who often combine their will to manage with a desire for career mobility and a maximization of what financial gain there is to be had in their field.

What seems to be absent from the careerist calculus of the upwardly mobile administrative class is a consideration of the end game of this reform movement. In promoting policies to both centralize school administration at the state-level and implement cloud-based instruction in the classroom, the very reforms which administrators are tasked with enacting will eventually remove the need for an expansive administrative infrastructure within the public-school system. One of the core tenets of neoliberalism is reducing wage bill expenditure while ostensibly providing an equivalent or better level of "service" within the institution, and there is no larger individual salary target within the school system than administrators. While there will always be a need for a classroom presence—whether this is the traditional teacher or some form of reconfigured "facilitator"—the number of high salaried administrators employed to manage this classroom presence will necessarily be reduced and/or outsourced as a cost-saving mechanism, and therefore it would be unreasonable to assume that everyone in the ranks of school district administration (department supervisors, vice principals, principals, curriculum development specialists, superintendents, etc.) will find well-paid, sustainable positions within a privatized school system and the for-profit vendors aiming to serve it. The reform movement needs a proliferation of administrators to eviscerate traditional education, but will have little need for them once this transformation has been completed.

**Unions**

Neoliberalism, as a movement, has wrought havoc on organized labor in the United States. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 10.7% of the U.S. workforce is currently represented by a union, down almost 10% since 1983 (around the time that neoliberal politics began to gain influence in the United States).[28] In the public sector, however, workers fair better when it comes to union representation, with 34.4% of workers represented versus 6.4% in the private sector, and teachers, librarians, and others involved in education or training professions accounting for just over 3 million of the country's 14.6 million unionized workers.[29] While this is down markedly from the peak unionization rates of the 1950s, it is a sizeable enough group of people paying a sizeable amount of dues to have a voice in the political arena. Unions, where they are still active, do vet candidates for state elections, organize marches, buy ad time on TV in support of their chosen causes, and, in so doing, command a certain amount of attention from democratic candidates.

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[28] "Union Membership Rate 10.7 Percent in 2016 : The Economics Daily: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics," accessed May 2, 2017, https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/union-membership-rate-10-point-7-percent-in-2016.htm.

[29] "Union Members Summary," accessed May 2, 2017, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm.

The problem, however, that unions face is that, on the national level, their media presence, political investments, and organizational self-understanding lag far behind private sector lobbyists and the neoliberal reformers who seek to undermine the professional autonomy of the teaching profession. For three decades or more, neoliberal ideology has methodically attacked public education to the point that critiques of public schools have become accepted political intuitions in both popular culture and within the culture of the school. Teachers, naturally, have been painted as freeloading, underperforming rogues getting fat off of public expenditures while delivering substandard education and contributing to school failure. Parents, administrators, and even students have unconsciously absorbed this rhetoric as the perceived laws of nature that render the public provision of education inferior to private school or charter school alternatives. In spite of all of this negative press, unions have largely sat back and defended the wages and benefits for their members, without developing a systematic political strategy to combat this crisis of public perception and, in the limited instances in which they have tried to fight back in public forums, their efforts have come too late and have been too timid to affect a change in public opinion. Certainly, wages and benefits are immensely important, but when the image of teachers is denigrated in public discourse, it is not long before this prejudice becomes law and law becomes precedent, leading to a slow spiral of decline in what can be achieved during labor negotiations.[30] This is a climate in which the comfortably insular tropes of union solidarity and brotherhood are painfully insufficient when compared to the political and economic forces seeking to dissolve the remaining vestiges of organized labor. It is a reality, underpinned by every quantitative measure available, that cannot be corrected by wearing a specific color T-shirt and getting a pro-union hashtag to trend on Twitter.

In light of these developments, unions must drastically alter their core operating principles if they have any hope of surviving beyond the next 10 years. Thankfully, the very political strategies at the disposal of neoliberalism are also available to unions, given their somewhat sizeable membership and income streams. The first goal should be to change their organizational self-understanding from that of a traditional union to a professional lobbying organization—one which doesn't seek to convince politicians of its members' social value, but instead uses the same strategies of institutional "capture" that have made neoliberal political interventions so successful. The mechanics of this change are beyond the scope of this paper to outline, but the organizations on which to model a revitalized union movement are not that of ideologically similar organizations on the left like the ACLU, AFL-CIO, or the EFF, but rather the NRA, the police unions, and the Koch Brothers. Distasteful as this might seem to national union leadership, these groups have created the blueprint for how to successfully lobby a neoliberal government and, if we are in the end game of unionization, it is time to depart from the political high-road and use all of the tools at our disposal.

The second goal of modernized, effective union representation should be to reassume a position of intellectual authority in debates about pedagogy. By restricting their activity to the narrow scope of compensation and benefits, unions have allowed the aforementioned gurus and reformist firebrands to step into public discourse and define what effective education should look like. The results, as presented here and elsewhere, have been a torrent of self-serving, pseudo-scientific practices that, more often than not, do not have students' best interests at heart, and are often vectors for selling new products and services into the public education "market." Just as teachers need to reassert their value as subject area experts, unions need to assume a greater role in studying and promoting what works in education, while at the same time aggressively deconstructing instructional models that don't work and which are simply part of broader ideological agendas. Private industry teacher training, to take but one example, is often overly standardized and riddled with so many superficialities and inconsistencies that it would make an easy target for a critical, activist union.

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[30] New Jersey is perhaps the best example of this political dynamic. Years of anti-teacher (and, to be fair, anti-government) rhetoric led to a law that caps the percentage of property taxes that flow into a school budget. The result has been a negotiating environment in which both unions and school boards bicker over a shrinking sliver of legally allowable funding. The prophecy thus becomes self-reinforcing: Public schools are "declining" and therefore deserve less funding, leading to a financial climate in which schools are doomed to further decline.

Such activism should also embed narratives of solidarity with parents and students as often as possible, ultimately building to joint actions with networks of parents who are equally concerned (and often underrepresented) about the direction of public education. Detailed critique, to be sure, exists within the ranks of unions and in their literature, but union leadership tends to be too diplomatic in how this critique is presented publicly, as if constantly walking on political eggshells and ever fearful of offending "key stakeholders." A vigorous intellectual defense of the profession means calling out bad pedagogy, whatever its source, and the best way to accomplish this is to frame the ways in which such pedagogy damages learning outcomes, particularly in vulnerable student populations. [31] The more student and parental buy-in achieved in this way, the better the chances of beating back the reformers for whom students are nothing more than end-users in a profit center.

Unions also need to develop creative strategies for financial survival beyond simply collecting membership dues, something that will be especially critical as states move to institute Right to Work legislation. If workers are free to opt-out of union dues, then unions need to find new ways of retaining membership and attracting new members. Such strategies will likely require expanding the scope of union operations and hiring a new workforce capable of reshaping the union movement from within. The reforms themselves, perhaps paradoxically, will require free market thinking and corporate models of efficiency that organized labor has eschewed for too long.[32] Here are two modest suggestions:

a.) In addition to fighting the ed tech encroachment into the classroom, unions should also offer venture capital to ed tech start-ups to create educational software that preserves and enhances the student teacher relationship, rather than seeking to replace it. One often forgets that, in a world mediated by technology, ideological objectives can be built into technology itself.[33] These alternative, union-funded ed tech companies could, for example, build in strong privacy protection for student data, and market this security to parents and school districts as an alternative to "free" competitors that sell this data to third parties without any semblance of transparency. Such companies could also create teacher lesson planning and evaluation software built from the ground up to be useful to teachers in their actual planning and practice, rather than just tedious exercises in compliance that are wholly secondary to actual planning and teaching. There is a market for this kind of thinking in educational technology, and unions should be the major force in developing it.

b.) Unions need to also consider privatizing key employment benefits on terms that are advantageous to their members, before financial crises and consolidations force their members to accept less than favorable readjustments to their compensation and retirement packages. One major issue on which unions could take preventative action is pension liabilities, which by many accounts are in a state of impending crisis.[34] Teachers' unions could, for example, actually lobby for the privatization of pension funds, as long as the management of said funds would be under their control. This would, of course, require them to hire and fairly compensate a group of highly trained fund managers, but it would have a few distinct benefits. It is, first and foremost, an incredibly powerful political weapon to use against neoliberal political adversaries, in that it replaces an "entitlement" with a "free market solution." Could a self-avowed free market politician credibly argue against this idea? It would also allow membership a direct voice in how the money is invested and could potentially avoid or at least ameliorate crisis scenarios through careful planning

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[31] The most fruitful recent example of such an issue is the glaring lack of network security policies in many of the nation's school districts. See: Gennie Gebhart, "Spying on Students: School-Issued Devices and Student Privacy," *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, April 13, 2017, https://www.eff.org/wp/school-issued-devices-and-student-privacy.

[32] As David Harvey likes to point out in his various public appearances, the left should stop protesting Wal-Mart and seek to learn from it. Just because the left may have deep ideological opposition to corporations, there should be an openness to incorporate organizational strategies and efficiencies from the business community.

[33] Uber is perhaps the best example of this reality. The brilliance of Uber is that it manifests, in computer code, the values of the gig economy. The fact that it also provides lower-priced cab fares is just a byproduct of this ideological orientation.

[34] There are any number of compelling accounts of the public pension crisis in the financial press and in economic journals. Here is but one example: Danielle DiMartino Booth, "Pension Crisis Too Big for Markets to Ignore," *Bloomberg View*, March 24, 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-03-24/pension-crisis-too-big-for-markets-to-ignore.

(just like private university endowments have managed to do). Lastly, and perhaps most critically, these funds could build-in a management fee that would allow a small portion of the fund's profits to flow back into the unions themselves to further fund their advocacy.

Obviously, all of these suggestions require careful legal and strategic planning to implement, but the ethos of these ideas is something unions need to take seriously. The era of the traditional union is over and they continue to exist because of a combination of political habit and charity that is steadily dissolving with each passing year. The only leverage left for teachers' unions rests in their comparatively large numbers of members and the ability of those members to continue to pay their dues. These strengths need to be funneled into new organizational structures that will allow for a more rigorous representation of member interests, and there is no better way to achieve this goal than to advance ideas that allow members themselves to have a stronger voice in their professional and financial destiny. Sitting back and hoping for politicians and corporate lobbies "to do the right thing" is no longer a viable strategy in what is, more than ever, a battle for survival.

**Society and the Fate of Knowledge**

Though the reshaping of public education will at first be presented as part of a revitalized, modern pedagogy that will offer better outcomes with less public expenditure, the marginalization of the teacher is more than just a cost-saving mechanism or the natural result of Silicon Valley innovation. It is the gateway to a new and dangerous model of knowledge production and transmission in Western societies. Since roughly the birth of the nation-state, public education has existed as a dynamic, social process— a way of transferring knowledge from generation to generation and, in so doing, ensuring the development of civilization through time. The social mechanism that makes public education effective is intergenerational dialogue, a complex human interaction of equal parts authority, rebellion, appropriation, and curiosity. Regardless of the medium into which the instructional materials are inscribed, education happens with humans in a room. The art and the science of teaching, to borrow an overused phrase, is combining subject area mastery with an ability to transmit this knowledge effectively in a social space. This can happen with or without technology, but it can't occur when the source of instructional authority is hidden away in the cubicle of an ed tech company. Assuming that an algorithm can teach with the richness that exists in a dialogic classroom or recasting rigorous direct and small group instruction as a luxury to be enjoyed only in the best private schools and universities, is an affront to the democratic tradition of the United States. Whereas public education has always served particular state interests, the United States has always been unique in linking public education to the cultivation of an informed, self-reliant citizenry capable of enacting the civic responsibilities of democratic society— even if, in the end, the underlying motive for expanding public education was always economic in nature. Sacrificing the fundamental form of the student-teacher relationship for the purposes of creating a new market makes our students vulnerable to all manner of profit-driven abuses, while slowly depriving them of the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the society they will inherit.

More broadly, however, the centralization of knowledge in the hands of a few ed tech service providers will have an extremely dangerous intended consequence. By creating instructional materials and delivering them directly to children, ed tech companies will increasingly be able to define what is worth knowing and teaching. Their interests will determine how we prepare students for the future and how we frame the possibilities, necessities, and limitations of that future. Under the cold value-added calculus that will likely guide their decision making, ed tech companies may purge whole subject areas from school curricula, or imbue them with the ideology of neoliberalism to better serve the goals of the educational reform movement, much like Google Doodles embed the history of human curiosity and achievement within Google's particular narrative of innovation. Knowledge itself, once an open, amorphous, unpredictable synthesis of human intellect and experience, will become programmatic and subjected to a staging and sequencing by third parties for whom critical thinking, dissent, and radical experimentation will, at best, be

an afterthought. While the children of the wealthy may have a chance to develop their creative capacities and have a degree of choice in what and how they learn, the rest of society will be beholden to the edicts of a big data infrastructure that will purport to "know our children better than we know them ourselves." Teachers, where tolerated, will be left to exist on the margins of the corporate definition of value, while society itself will have outsourced the intellectual capacity for public debate and collective action to a small clique of techno-plutocrats who have long ago de-coupled their personal destinies from the social outcomes of democratic societies.[35]

It is therefore imperative that we, as teachers, recognize the dangers of these times and mobilize to make a coherent, intellectually persuasive, and politically vigorous defense of our profession. We can no longer afford to "weather the storm until retirement" and, in fact, have a moral obligation to defend every child's right to a free, high quality, ideologically neutral education that responds to their broad spectrum of needs- as opposed to the needs of the neoliberal class for compliant users of digital platforms with enough technical knowledge to be useful, and enough of a deficit in critical thinking to passively accept whatever is required of them. Though a seemingly daunting task, and one far removed from the daily challenges of teaching, it is a battle that can still be won. The neoliberal reform movement is not over, and there is still time to influence public perception and reclaim the ideological landscape that has been so skillfully wrested away from us over the past three decades. The following practical strategies should be a starting point in defending our students and our profession:

- ***Recognition:*** It is essential to recognize the extent to which our profession is being compromised by broader economic trends. This paper, and the literature referenced in it, will hopefully prove useful in this regard. All too often, we assume that large class sizes, shrinking pensions, dilapidated buildings, and increased high-stakes testing are simply the results of the natural laws of society that we are powerless to change. This is inaccurate. Many of our professional challenges are the direct result of the ideological program of neoliberalism manifesting itself in our workplaces.
- ***Reversal of the Legitimation Crisis:*** A key strategy in neoliberal school reform is a concerted effort to delegitimize the work of teachers. We are made culpable for all manner of deficiencies in public education beyond our control, even though we are fully aware that many of these ills could be corrected by progressive political interventions. We need to start pointing this out in public forums. We also need to turn the blunt instrument of the legitimation crisis back on the neoliberal actors themselves. Teachers did not plunge the world economy into a crisis in 2008, we are not automating people out of jobs, we are not making 271 times the salary of the average worker, we are not evading taxes, and we are not responsible for 40 years of wage stagnation.[36] As such, it is very easy to argue that we add far more value to society than the salaries we draw.
- ***Redefinition of the Tech Debate:*** Much as unions have to reclaim intellectual authority on public debates about education reform, teachers need to redefine the terms of technology implementation in their classrooms. Though there is obviously anti-technology sentiment in this paper, no serious educator would want to turn back the clock and restrict access to technology as such. We need instead to establish our expertise in when, how, and when not to use technology in delivering quality lessons. As a profession, we need to thank Silicon Valley for their wonderful devices and software, and then show them the door to the classroom when it comes to using these advancements in our work.
- ***Return to Disciplines:*** Teachers should vehemently reject the label of coaches and facilitators, and embrace the role of the subject area expert. We are, first and foremost, knowledge workers, and our particular skill set is not simply "knowing facts" and "loving kids," but connecting our subject area expertise

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[35] One of the most interesting pieces of evidence for this attitude can be found in Citigroup's so called "Plutonomy Memos." See: Ajay Kapur, Niall Macleod, and Narendra Singh, "Equity Strategy: Buying Luxury, Explaining Global Imbalances" (CitiGroup, October 16, 2005), https://delong.typepad.com/plutonomy-1.pdf.

[36] "CEO Pay Remains High Relative to the Pay of Typical Workers and High-Wage Earners," *Economic Policy Institute*, accessed July 31, 2017, http://www.epi.org/publication/ceo-pay-remains-high-relative-to-the-pay-of-typical-workers-and-high-wage-earners/.

with our knowledge of child psychology and academic development in the efficient delivery of complex information. When one considers how poorly information is "taught" and complexity is "explained" in private sector training and within public discourse, it is easy to establish the true value of a good teacher. To be fair, this will mean that some of us will have to seek out real professional development, break old habits and complacencies, and quickly reacquaint ourselves with the latest developments in our fields. But we need to do it on our terms, and we need to do it before the neoliberal reformers do it for us.

- ***Resistance within Districts:*** All too often, we as a profession have acquiesced to district-level policies that are not in the best interests of children and not in our professional interests. This needs to end. When neoliberal reforms, policies, technologies, and practices are rolled out at the district level, teachers need to actively resist them. If we work, individually and collectively, to reclaim our intellectual authority in public debates, this will be easy. Frequently, the highest levels of district management assume our professional compliance as a matter of course, and therefore lack convincing arguments and reliable data to substantiate new policies. As such, there are likely numerous opportunities for meaningful resistance in any given school, and these need to be seized upon when they arise.
- ***Reaching Out to Natural Allies:*** Teachers, individually and within their professional associations, need to reach out and build consensus with parents, other local unions, and civil rights organizations with overlapping goals and commitments. Parents are the natural starting point, as we interact with them every week and they are as committed as we are to successful outcomes for their children. In this climate of distrust in public institutions, we do, of course, run into parents who are angry and who do not respect us, but rather than go on the defensive or cower in the face of conflict, we need to redirect the parent anger we encounter toward district administration and public policy rather than classroom practice. It is as simple as saying "I hear you. I agree. But here is the problem…"[37] At the same time, however, we need to coordinate our efforts with other groups, both national and international, that are fighting for recognition and political survival in the neoliberal economy. There is growing dissatisfaction with the political status quo and the increasing levels of economic alienation and inequality it has created. We have millions of natural allies in this country alone, and many more abroad. We need to find them and work with them.
- ***Reconnect:*** While the union movement has not been nearly as effective as it should have been in defending our profession against the broad neoliberal assault on education, they are still the best chance we have at building political leverage. Unions offer two things we need: numbers and money, and rather than turn our backs on them as they are slowly squeezed out of operational viability, we need to reconnect with our local associations and force their officers to be more innovative and aggressive. Eventually, new talent will rise to positions of state and national leadership, and it is at this point that we can begin to reshape the public perception of our role in society.

For the majority of us, teaching is a vocation, a personal calling that goes beyond the narrow definitions and responsibilities of mere "work." We have, perhaps on an unconscious level, committed ourselves to this profession, "come what may." This generosity of spirit, however, has been seized upon by the neoliberal reform movement and has become a professional liability. It is vital that the teaching profession realize this, and come to terms with the fact that, like it or not, our workplace has become deeply politicized. For some of us, recognizing this reality might mean abandoning the professional high road and being forced to engage in a defiant activism that, over time, becomes emotionally draining. Our best defense of our students and our livelihoods, however, will not be primarily achieved through protest and picketing, but through returning to first principles. If anything, what I propose amounts to a kind of radical rationality—a will to do what is ethically, professionally, and instinctively right in the face of a vicious political ideology that is robbing people of their basic rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. As teachers, we must

[37] Again, the most effective places to start are the issues of student data protection and standardized testing. Parents and teachers are on the same side of these battles, and yet we, as teachers, have neglected to utilize this common ground.

therefore return to our most basic responsibilities: to defend the values of humanism and democracy, to provide equal access to high quality education, and to produce the basic intellectual conditions for civilization. And doing this means, paradoxically, doing nothing more than passionately pursuing the profession that we love, and doing it proudly and publicly. We must organize to fight a winning battle and, even if we do not prevail, we will honor the values of the civil society that is fading away and, quite possibly, be an inspiration to the more just society which is to come.

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