Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics

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One of the most important debates black intellectuals engaged in at the onset of the twentieth century concerned education. Should black people be given a classic liberal education, designed to pursue the good and just life, or should black people be given a vocational education, designed to give them the skills and discipline needed to become financially independent? W.E.B. Du Bois was the most prominent proponent of the former, Booker T. Washington was the most prominent proponent of the latter. The consequences of this debate for African Americans were significant—although evidence suggests that Washington may have privately supported black political activism, we know that publicly not only did he make a number of statements in support of Jim Crow, his model of education hurt black laborers and helped wealthy whites (Anderson 1988). But there were broader consequences for the rest of society—if the nation promoted Washington’s ideas about education, America’s schools would be transformed and the very purpose of education would be limited to giving Americans the skills they need to find jobs, as opposed to giving Americans the tools they need to become fully human.

In the current moment three overlapping crises loom large in discussions about the American education system. One crisis concerns the increasing threat posed by our competitors in the international economic arena. People concerned about this threat see America falling further and further behind India, China, Japan, and other nations, because our children are under-educated in comparison to their overseas peers. Domestically, a range of educators are increasingly concerned about the growing divide within the nation between black and Latino children and their white counterparts on the one hand,
and between children educated in urban school systems and children educated in suburban school systems on the other. Finally, people are increasingly concerned with the growing cost of education. On average, even after the recession, state support for state colleges like the University of Michigan have decreased approximately $2400, even as tuition in state colleges has increased approximately $1300 (Hiltonsmith and Draut 2014). Similarly, federal grant aid to students has been reduced, and student reliance on loans has increased.

In this chapter I address the neoliberalization of education. Increasingly, parents, students, teachers, principals, superintendents, schools, and school districts are expected to adhere to the values of the market, changing the purpose of education itself. And while this has broad effects given the particular role education plays in black communities, this move is particularly dire for them. The three crises I note above are all partially responsible for the growing neoliberal transformation of education, a transformation that itself generates its own crisis. And, like the transformation of the church, we see African Americans not simply victimized by this transformation but involved in its spread, as the reduction of democratic values that lie at the heart of the neoliberal transformation not only take political power away from black people, it reduces our political imagination to the point where it is difficult for us to even imagine a form of education that isn’t solely about increasing one’s preparedness for a job.

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In 1983 Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of Education created a national commission to study the state of America’s educational system. Whereas Reagan wanted the Department of Education (created by his predecessor Jimmy Carter) abolished, the Secretary of Education had other ideas. The resulting report, entitled “A Nation at Risk”, basically saved the Department of Education from destruction. Written when the country was in the middle of an economic depression, the report suggested that America’s failing educational system was the result of America’s failing economy. As a result of this report, states
and local governments began to implement education policies based on the idea that the primary purpose of education was to train workers rather than prepare citizens.

By the time “A Nation at Risk” was published, it was clear that industrial cities like Detroit and Baltimore needed revitalization. Manufacturers had almost fully automated, and had not only fled the Rust Belt for the South and the West, they’d begun to flee the United States for foreign (cheap, non-unionized) labor. Left in the wake of the manufacturing exodus were schools primarily designed to prepare people for jobs in the manufacturing plants, jobs that no longer existed. City leaders wanted to attract businesses that could employ their citizens, and wanted to attract middle-class families that could help generate revenue and revitalize the city in other ways, but they felt they couldn’t and believed the state of their school systems were to blame. Simultaneously, responding to the same forces to a certain extent, parents, teachers, and principals wanted more control over what happened in their schools.

As a result, city and state leaders began to promote four ideas. They promoted the idea of site-based management, giving parents, principals, and teachers in individual schools more authority in the hopes this would lead to better educational outcomes. In addition, they proposed taking over school systems themselves, placing school districts under the direct control of the mayor and the state governor. Now, it wasn’t as if mayors didn’t already have enough to do, particularly in the Rust Belt.¹

But many mayors believed that they were being implicitly judged on the quality of their schools anyway and that they may as well actually take full responsibility for them. Furthermore, inasmuch as the businesses they were trying to attract not only wanted to be able to hire local graduates, they wanted

¹ As they weren’t flush with municipal revenue and couldn’t go to either their state capital or to Washington, DC, to get resources, they had to consistently work to find ways to either pare down the services they did provide or they had to find alternative sources of revenue to provide the services they couldn’t cut. This, while they had to also find new ways to attract businesses development. So one could argue that making mayors responsible for the schools was simply piling it on.
the middle-class families they relocated into the city to be able to have schools to place their kids in, mayors felt they had an extra responsibility. Finally, although many could and did argue that elected school boards were important vehicles with which taxpaying voters could exert some say in how their tax dollars were spent on education, the mayors believed that democracy was actually failing the school systems, in part because they relied on the popular vote. I’m going to come back to this later, but this is very important, because it suggests that the crisis of urban education is in part a crisis of democracy.

As a result, starting in 1989, state after state passed legislation giving state and local officials the power to permanently or temporarily take over failing school districts, “failing” defined either by persistent debt or by persistently high dropout rates. New Jersey, Kentucky, and four other states were the first to take over failing school districts in 1989. By 2004, more than 50% of states had taken over school districts, with the vast majority of these attempts occurring between 1995 and 1997 (Shober et al. 2006). And while some of these school districts were taken over for explicitly educational reasons, in the vast majority of cases school districts were taken over for fiscal reasons.

So the first two ideas were site-based management and school system takeovers. Third, state and local leaders proposed vouchers and charter schools. Educational vouchers are certificates of funding given to individual families that they can use in turn to spend on school tuition at participating public or private schools. Charter schools are public institutions; however, they differ from traditional public schools in that they receive a “charter” from the state to operate independently of the school district where they are geographically located. This charter gives them the flexibility to take students from inside and outside of their geographical area, as well as flexibility in hiring and in teaching. Between 1991 and 1999, 35 states passed charter school legislation.

Finally, state and local leaders proposed the increased use of standardized test scores in order to improve “accountability”. In 1996 and 1999, the nation’s governors convened at IBM’s corporate headquarters. In both meetings, IBM CEO Louis Gerstner called for states to develop a standardized way to assess and measure educational outcomes in order to force schools
to meet corporate expectations for their potential labor pool (Hursh 2001). Within a few years of their last meeting, the concept of standardized tests, already used to determine college admittances, had become the norm in most American states and, with the passage of No Child Left Behind, the nation itself.

Up to this point I’m putting a great deal of responsibility on political leaders at the state and local level. However, they weren’t the only major players. Indeed, though federal, state, and local political leaders are important, venture philanthropists may be even more important, including foundations like the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation ($922 million in assets as of 2013), the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation ($1.890 billion in assets as of 2013), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation ($41.310 billion in assets as of 2013), and the Walton Family Foundation of Walmart fame ($2.481 billion in assets as of 2013).

The move towards vouchers and charters, for example, comes in part from John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe’s (1990) Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools. They argued that the central problem facing America’s public school system was that it didn’t give parents and students enough choice, and it didn’t allow for enough competition. The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation provided significant funding support ($375,000) for their work, which transformed the conversation on American education. In 1989, two years after the school takeovers began, Wendy Kopp, a young Ivy League student, wrote an undergraduate thesis proposing the creation of a domestic peace corps of young teachers, who would go into the poorest school districts in rural and urban communities and transform them. The program she proposed became “Teach for America” (TFA). As opposed to the standard method of training teachers—sending them to educational school—TFA took students from a much wider disciplinary range in order to both increase the number of individuals interested in the teaching profession and lead to substantial innovation in the schools. From a first class of 500 idealistic kids, TFA now has over 8,000 teachers in schools and has over 32,000 alumni. The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation is one of its largest supporters, giving over $10 million.

What do the phenomena I trace above have to do with the neoliberal turn?
The takeovers made possible by state legislation mostly occur in cities that have suffered the most from diminishing state and federal resources. The school systems in these cities are failing largely as a result of growing class and racial inequality, combined with those dwindling resources. The turn generates the conditions for failure and simultaneously uses those failures to call for more neoliberal solutions, in the form of better and more efficient “management”, decreased democratic government, individual “choice” and “liberty”, and vouchers and charters, which all supposedly give individual parents the freedom to look at a variety of options for their children alongside their neighborhood school. These modifications all come at a cost. Placing more responsibility on schools as opposed to dealing with the structural conditions they face tends to increase rather than decrease poor educational outcomes. As I show below, rarely have school takeovers either reduced debt or significantly improved educational outcomes.

The neoliberal turn itself doesn’t come without a number of foundations and philanthropists promoting intellectual ideas. The venture philanthropists that promote charters, vouchers, new school district models, programs like Teach for America, and increasingly institutions designed to train and develop school officials, have driven the transformation of public schools into market-oriented institutions. Indeed, a quick glance at their funding programs reveal the stark use of market language in describing their philanthropy, as many of them focus on “investments” rather than “grants”, on “ventures” rather than “programs”, and on “social returns on investments” as opposed to “deliverables” (Scott 2009).

The shift towards charters and vouchers increasingly turns parents into private consumers. Traditional public schools situated in and based on local residence can serve a valuable community-building role. Indeed, the school often helps define the community. Similarly, the political organizations connected to the school—whether it be the PTA or the formal school board—can help develop community social and political capital. However, the move towards charters and vouchers significantly reduces that community-building potential. The parent is no longer situated in a community, but is rather a singular consumer interested in purchasing the best education
for his or her child, in order to solely develop his/her human
capital. To the extent democracy appears at all here, it appears
in the form of “choice” and “freedom”. Following up from this
effect, the ability of communities to mobilize politically are
destabilized because the number of neighborhood schools
that can help cement those community ties are replaced by
non-geographically bound charters.

The move towards charters in particular represents a wealth
transfer from public to private sources. But this wealth trans-
fer doesn’t simply come in the form of for-profit management
companies taking public resources. In 2000, Bill Clinton
signed legislation authorizing “New Market Tax Credits”. For
Clinton and other more progressive neoliberals, the central
problem poor neighborhoods faced was not capitalism itself,
but rather the profound lack of capital. These tax credits would
spur capital investments by making it far more profitable to
invest in poor communities. Many of these tax credits ended
up going towards the construction of charter schools (which
were covered under the credits). Indeed, combined with other
credits, investors could see as much as a 100% return on their
investment within less than a decade, and as they’re often
loaning the money for charter school construction, this comes
in addition to the interest they receive from the loan (Gonzalez
2010; Magliaro 2013). Many charters financed using these
credits end up spending a significant portion of their revenue
on debt service (as their rents have significantly increased) at
the expense of education. Finally, as one of the ways charter
schools reduce their costs is by hiring non-unionized teachers
and staff, the charter schools indirectly reduce worker protec-
tions and reduce support for unions in general.

It’s worth noting that many of the effects “competition”
and “choice” (in the form of charters and vouchers) were
supposed to introduce haven’t occurred. Just as only a small
portion of traditional public schools consistently produce
excellent educational outcomes, only a small portion of char-
ter schools do. The evidence suggests that charter schools on
the whole either underperform their traditional public school
counterparts or perform only as well as their traditional public
school counterparts (Bifulco and Ladd 2006; Hanushek et al.
2007; Zimmer and Buddin 2006), that they may increase racial
segregation (Garcia 2008), and rarely innovate in the classroom (Lubienski 2003), and that they are far harsher on their students than their traditional public school counterparts (Davis et al. 2015).

Theoretically, the market is supposed to hold charters and vouchers accountable. But the education “market” doesn’t quite function like this for many reasons, and I’ll focus on three. First, because each school only has a limited number of positions and award positions during a limited time period, parents end up being forced to compete with other parents, whereas if the market functioned “normally” each school would have as many positions as there was demand. As a result, schools are given much more power to choose, and much more power to shunt potentially problematic students away. Although the evidence suggests that most charters do not engage in “cream- ing”—that is to say, they do not use the power they have to accept only the best students—evidence does suggest that charters engage in “cropping”—that is to say, they may “crop off” their service in ways that end up underserving students with disabilities and special needs (Lacireno-Paquet et al. 2002). Further, inasmuch as some parents tend to have more resources than others, charter schools may end up providing more benefits for more resourceful parents.

Second, while theoretically “failing” schools should be punished by the market—parents aware that a given charter school is underperforming should stay away from that school, causing it to fail because of lack of students—the reality is quite different. The state of Michigan has the weakest charter school regulations in the country, in part because of the belief that the market would function better than any set of state regulations. Rather than the “market” continually shutting down failing charter schools, the “market” allows poorly performing charters to stay open year after year. Further, the “market” in the Michigan case allows charter schools—many of them operated by for-profit management companies—to keep their

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2 In the 2013–2014 school year, for instance, approximately 110 of New York City’s 164 charter schools employed far harsher suspension and expulsion policies than that allowed by New York City Department of Education disciplinary codes (Davis et al. 2015).
books closed, preventing taxpayers from knowing how their money is spent (Dixon et al. 2014).

Third, bringing the profit motive into education is supposed to theoretically cause charter schools to innovate in order to do the best job of attracting “customers”. But introducing the profit motive tends to have two other problematic effects. Particularly in the absence of regulations, it generates a perverse incentive to cut costs (which may cause charters to engage in the “crop-off” practice I note above). And it results in corruption, with charter school representatives receiving and doling out kickbacks for a variety of services (Dixon et al. 2014). Similarly, it ends up introducing a number of players in the education arena who are far more interested in profits than they are interested in education. An entire business sector has grown around charter school management. If we think of education, then, as not simply about educating, but also about a bundle of contracts (for construction, for management, for goods and services, etc.), we can see how much real money is at stake. Charter schools, then, are not simply about increasing support for the idea of market-oriented education, they are also about the money that goes into constructing and managing them.

Significantly increasing the number of quality teachers in the profession is a worthwhile endeavor, as is going against the market by putting our nation’s best and brightest to work in some of our poorest urban and rural communities. However, in its attempt to transform education, TFA makes a few moves worth criticizing. First it explicitly supports de-regulating and to an extent de-professionalizing teaching by taking its teachers from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds and suggesting that it’s possible to fully prepare a graduate without a teaching degree for the rigors of a school classroom with little more than two years of on-the-ground training plus summer orientation sessions. Second, it has been essential in the creation of a network of individuals and institutions dedicated to privatizing education. A number of its founders and

\[^3\] The research suggests that teachers recruited from TFA and other similar programs underperform their certified counterparts (Darling-Hammond et al. 2005; Kane et al. 2008; Laczko-Kerr and Berliner 2002).
its membership have either gone on to create individual charter schools, charter school organizations like the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), charter school venture funds (New School Venture Fund), training programs (Broad Center for the Management of School Systems), and non-profits that promote charters; many have also taken leadership positions in federal, state, and local education endeavors. Indeed, arguably TFA has more influence in this sector than any other non-profit outside of the foundations from which it has received a significant portion of its resources (Kretchmar et al. 2014). And a number of them have run for office (Strauss 2013b). Just as charter schools and vouchers take money from public coffers for private purposes, generating a competition over scarce resources that often leaves school systems poorer than they were before, TFA decreases city coffers through charging the cities the equivalent of a finder’s fee for every TFA member they bring in, something cities wouldn’t necessarily have to do for teachers hired through normal processes (Cohen 2015). Not only does this further reduce support for the idea that traditional teachers are valuable, given the financial straits many city school districts find themselves in, but the costs also end up taking a toll on city budgets — something that is particularly important to consider given the fact that TFA teachers don’t outperform their certified counterparts.

The changes I detail above generate the context for two of the most important pieces of education legislation passed since the sixties. One of President George W. Bush’s most important domestic initiatives while in office was No Child Left Behind (NCLB), passed by Congress during his first year, a policy designed to take a “compassionate conservative” approach to education. NCLB created rigorous national standards (measured by performance on standardized tests) that schools, particularly those receiving Title I funds to educate poor populations, were expected to adhere to. Schools that showed a consistent pattern of underperformance would suffer a series of escalating sanctions, including being forced to pay for students to attend better-performing schools, and finally being shut down and having its entire staff replaced.

NCLB further attempts to transform the parent into the informed consumer. The legislation forces parents to use test
scores to evaluate schools, and gives them the liberty and responsibility of choosing alternatives—especially charters and private schools—when the school doesn’t deliver services effectively. The use of seemingly objective standardized tests to measure performance becomes a vehicle that increases competition between schools, between teachers, between principals. Just as failing in the market causes firms to go out of business, failing in the high-stakes testing game causes schools to close, causes teachers and principals to lose their jobs. One of the consequences of Reagan-era reforms was that state and local governments often found themselves having to meet federal dictates without receiving significant levels of federal funding. We see that with NCLB, as schools and local school districts did not have the resources to do much of what they were expected to.

With Obama’s election in 2008, the thought was that NCLB would be dissolved, given the support Obama received from teachers unions. But Obama appointed Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education. Before being Secretary of Education, Duncan was the CEO of Chicago Public Schools. Throughout his tenure in Chicago, he supported the development of charter schools and the increasing marketization of education. After becoming Secretary of Education, he touted the values of mayoral takeover over locally elected school boards, and helped develop Race To The Top (RTTT), the federal educational policy that replaced NCLB. The central idea embedded in RTTT is that state educational systems, local school districts, local schools, teachers, administrators, and parents, all perform better when they compete against one another. Taking a similar approach to education systems that Bill Clinton took to cities, RTTT allocated $4.35 billion for a national competition between states. Participating states would be scored on a range of criteria, from prioritizing STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) in state education programs (15 points maximum), developing and applying common standards (40 points maximum), to creating the conditions necessary for charter schools and other “innovative” schools to thrive (40 points maximum).

Just as in Clinton’s empowerment policy, the RTTT program incentivizes market behavior and, in this specific case,
further incentivizes the development of market-oriented approaches to public education. Only the states with the highest scores received funding. On paper, RTTT “rewards innovation” by giving resources to states, school systems, and teachers that increase student achievement and school quality. But by “rewarding innovation” through mechanisms of competition, the policy ended up punishing poorly performing school systems and teaching staffs, and in doing so created perverse incentives for cheating—35 Atlanta educators, including the superintendent, accused of running a sophisticated assessment-test cheating ring were indicted in 2013 for charges of theft and racketeering, and Atlanta’s school system isn’t alone (Strauss 2013a). Further, by requiring that failing schools either close or be privatized, the policy increasingly destabilizes public education without increasing educational quality. It bears stating at this point that charter schools perform no better and often much worse than regular public schools in educational outcomes. Furthermore, because they are far less regulated than their regular public school counterparts, poorly functioning charter schools are often allowed to continue to fail parents far longer than true “market” circumstances would dictate.4 Finally, these legislative changes further enable a new wave of state takeovers, often managed by people who have either been trained by the institutions developed by the venture philanthropists, are TFA alum, or have been influenced by the general idea that schools work best when they function like businesses. And inasmuch as schools don’t work best when they function like businesses, the various school failures that end up coming as a result only lead in more neoliberal change.

African Americans are not only particularly affected by these changes, the neoliberalization of education doesn’t come without African Americans. The first vouchers and charter schools

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4 My home state of Michigan does perhaps the poorest job of regulating charter schools. A year-long investigation conducted by the Detroit Free Press in 2014 found that charter schools spent over $1 billion per year of state taxpayer dollars with little to no transparency, with no real substantial educational progress, with very little regulation, and with significant levels of corruption (Dixon et al. 2014).
arguably appear in response to *Brown v. Board* when white Southerners decide they don’t wish to send their children to integrated schools. Similarly, the spread of magnet schools—a seventies innovation—arguably comes as a result of the various rulings that enable segregated school systems to continue to exist. The connection between the economy and education that educators make in the report “A Nation at Risk” is in part a response to attempts to radicalize education often conducted by black parents on behalf of black children (Ravitch 2003). Finally, the various takeovers that radically reduce the ability of parents to make political decisions about their schools are arguably made easier when whites in general believe the (black) populations mostly affected do not have the capacity to govern themselves.

However, blacks are not only victimized by the transformations in urban education. Black elites are partially responsible for the transformations. More specifically, black political officials have often assisted in the takeover moves and have reproduced language blaming black parents and school children for poor educational outcomes. Blacks have often created public schools and managed failing school systems, and black intellectuals have themselves touted neoliberal solutions. Below I focus on a few different instances, showing how the cities I examined in chapter 2 and others like them have transformed their schools using some of the same techniques used to transform their cities. Second, I take the case of Roland Fryer—perhaps the country’s most influential black public intellectual—to return to the powerful role economic theory plays in the turn.

The first wave of school takeovers began in the early nineties. In Pennsylvania in 1998, in partial response to claims that Pennsylvania schools were funded poorly by the state because it was a majority black school district, the (Republican-run) state legislature passed Act 46 and then in 2001 passed Act 83. Act 46 gave Philadelphia’s Secretary of Education the ability to declare a school district in “distress”, and then the ability to replace the (elected) school board of “first class” members of “distressed” districts (districts with at least 1 million persons) with a five-person “School Reform Commission” (with the governor appointing four of those individuals). Act 83 added
to Act 46 by giving the Governor sole authority for removing the members of the School Reform Commission and by making teacher strikes in “distressed districts” illegal, severely reducing their ability to contest the proposed reforms. Teachers unions in such districts couldn’t, for example, bargain over third-party contracts, over the provision of educational services, over class size, over staff reductions, and over the academic calendar, among other things. Furthermore, if any teacher or staff person did engage in a strike or a strike-related activity, that individual could be punished by having his/her certification taken away.

By definition, the only school district in the state that was eligible for takeover was the School District of Philadelphia. In 2001—the same year NCLB became law—the State of Pennsylvania did just that, with the (Republican) governor citing low test-scores, crumbling schools, and severe fiscal distress. As part of the takeover plan, the school superintendent was replaced with a CEO, and seven for-profit and nonprofit firms took control of 45 public elementary and middle schools, changing them into charter schools (Gill et al. 2007). (Black) mayor John Street (who helped negotiate the terms of the takeover) was given the ability to appoint two members to the School Reform Commission. Within ten years, 35 additional schools were transformed into charters, bringing the total to 80 charters containing over 50,000 Philadelphia students. By April 2012, the School Reform Commission presented a proposal generated by the Boston Consulting Group (a global management consulting firm) that would help “right-size” the school system by closing more than 40 schools, privatizing a range of school services (including safety, cafeteria services, and transportation), and splitting the district up into five mini-districts who would be run by nonprofit and for-profit firms. This proposal itself was generated by a statewide economic crisis that saw Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett (GOP) cut over $300 million from the Philadelphia school budget, and was exacerbated by the decision to take out the same amount in loans, which significantly increased the school system’s debt burden. Due to this debt burden, in 2013 the School Reform Commission adopted what nearly everyone called
a “doomsday budget”, which proposed to eliminate nearly every staff person in every school (with the exception of the school principal and a small number of teachers). This, even as Governor Corbett signed legislation to build a $400 million prison (Stroud 2013).

In 1997, Michigan Governor John Engler (GOP) proposed taking over Detroit’s public schools. Although at the time (black) Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer Sr. (Dem) rejected the proposal, within two years he supported it, backing what became known as Michigan Public Act 10. The act would replace the elected school board with an appointed one and the school superintendent with a school CEO. At the time, the school system still had approximately $1.2 billion left of a $1.5 billion bond passed in 1994 for the purpose of building new schools and rebuilding the school system’s infrastructure. Further, the school system had moderately increasing enrollments, a $100 million surplus, and average test scores. Within five years, the surplus had been replaced with a $200 million deficit and a number of the construction projects had significant cost overruns. The state provided the district with a $210 million loan in order to deal with the debt, but the loan itself created a debt crisis. In partial response to the crisis, the (black) CEO shut down over two dozen schools and laid off over one thousand employees. Although at the time of the school takeover the size of the student population was relatively stable, after the school closures and the layoffs almost 20,000 students left the school system (Bellant 2011).

Detroit voters eventually returned some power to an elected school board, but the school board came into office facing significant structural hurdles, partially due to the additional problems brought on by the first takeover. In 2008, the State Superintendent declared that the school system faced a fiscal emergency, and at the end of 2008 Michigan’s governor declared that the school system be placed under emergency financial management, appointing African American Robert Bobb as emergency financial manager. As was the case with the city takeover of 2013, the school board remained but had no political power or authority. In 1999 and in 2008, the takeovers were touted as solutions to the district’s inability to educate a
majority of its students and to the district’s financial problems. One of Bobb’s first acts was to send layoff notices to every DPS teacher on contract—all 5466 of them (recall that the emergency financial manager legislation gave the manager the power to negate and renegotiate all contracts). By his second year in office he’d closed thirty more schools, and proposed a plan (“Renaissance Plan 2012”) to turn almost thirty percent of Detroit’s schools into charters. In 2011, Bobb stepped down, leaving the city’s schools in even more debt than when he entered. That same year, Michigan Governor Tom Snyder created the Education Achievement Authority, a borderless school district that would contain the worst performing schools in the state. It currently runs several Detroit schools.

Before Hurricane Katrina, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) was already under severe scrutiny, as it faced severe budgetary problems as well as corruption and graft. Within a few weeks after Katrina hit, the New Orleans community of Algiers proposed to secede from the OPSB and turn its nine schools into charters. Within six weeks of Katrina, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco (Dem) proposed taking over all of New Orleans’s poorly performing schools. Her plan was swiftly supported by the state legislature and passed in the form of Louisiana Legislative Act 35. This act placed 107 out of 128 New Orleans public schools under the control of a state-run “Recovery School District” and transformed over one-third of those schools into charters. Before the takeover, more than 50% of the teachers in New Orleans had 11 or more years of experience; after the takeover, the OPSB fired all 7500 teachers and staff members. After the rehiring process, more than 50% of the teaching staff had less than three years of experience (Dixson 2011). Along these lines, New Orleans schools witnessed a significant reduction in teacher salaries, benefits, and worker protections. Further, although the system—like charter school systems in general—was touted as increasing the ability of parents to choose, a significant number of students were turned away from the schools of their choice. In addition to charters, vouchers were introduced into the school system that allowed parents to send their children to private schools, further increasing competition and reducing the amount of public resources spent on traditional public schools. As of
the 2011–2012 school year, almost 80% of New Orleans’s public school students (42,000) attended charter schools (Akers 2012; Dixson 2011; Huff 2013).

These cases are not the only ones. In 2003, the State of California took over the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), citing a $37 million deficit. Under the state authority, OUSD removed many of its teachers, replacing them with younger teachers from Teach For America, shut down approximately half of Oakland’s public schools, and privatized many non-teaching staff positions (security guards, cooks, janitors, etc.). It also paved the way for the creation of several charter schools. After political control was returned to the school board, the OUSD student population had dropped over 30% (from 55,000 to 38,000) while its charter school population increased 400% (from approximately 2000 to 8000) to the point that almost 20% of OUSD students attend charters. And while debt was ostensibly the reason why the school district was taken over, OUSD debt tripled after the state takeover, as OUSD had to take out a $100 million loan from the state (#HandsOffDewey 2014; Allen-Taylor 2009; Anonymous 2012).

I noted that before he became President Obama’s Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan was the CEO of Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Chicago is in many ways the model for RTTT. Simultaneously, the number of charter schools have increased significantly from 50 in 2005 to over 100 now, with plans for another 60 over the next few years. Spending on charters has increased to over half a billion dollars in 2014 (Bacon 2013; Sirota 2014; Uetricht 2014). Under the leadership of then-Mayor Richard Daley (Dem), the Chicago Public School system closed over 100 schools between 2001 and 2012, with most of these closings occurring under Duncan’s leadership. In 2013, under the leadership of Mayor Rahm Emanuel (Dem)—a former Obama staff member—the Chicago Public School system shut down over 50 public schools at one time, affecting over 16,000 students (only 125 white), a decision brought about partially due to fiscal concerns. Further in an attempt to reduce the ability of Chicago teachers to strike, city leaders supported legislation that increased both the raw number and the percentage of union voters needed to authorize a strike. Pauline
Lipman’s (2011) work is crucial to understanding the neoliber-
alization of public education in urban school districts.

In these and other instances across the country, we see
efforts to roll back traditional public school education and to
roll out neoliberal education reform, often under the guise of
crisis. Political leaders in city after city call for the takeover of
education in order to deal with problems of fiscal mismanage-
ment and glaring achievement gaps, using the takeover to roll
out charters, to close down local neighborhood schools, and
to replace unionized teachers with non-unionized ones (often
provided for by Teach For America or local equivalents). In
each case venture philanthropy plays a significant role. They
often provide funding for cities to transition their schools to
charters, they provide funding to the larger charter systems
directly, and they provide funding to institutions like Teach
For America. But they also provide two other sources of aid.
They provide leadership. The Broad Foundation, for example,
created a superintendents academy designed to develop future
local, state, and national education leaders. The first three
individuals placed in charge of the Oakland Unified School
District were trained at the academy, as was Robert Bobb (the
first emergency financial manager of Detroit Public Schools).
From 2008–2011, Philadelphia’s superintendent of schools was
on Broad’s board of directors and headed Broad’s superinten-
dents academy.

And venture philanthropists provide ideas. I’ve already
examined the powerful role John E. Chubb’s and Terry Moe’s
ideas played in helping to transform common-sense ideas
about education. What I want to do now is to turn to the way
that the work of one specific black public intellectual has been
used to not only transform schools along neoliberal lines, but
to transform black children.

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Roland Fryer is an African American economist at Harvard
University. One of the youngest people to ever receive tenure
at Harvard (the youngest African American to do so), he’s the
recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship (the so-called “genius
grant”), the Calvó-Armengol International Prize (given
biannually to the most promising social scientist under 40 studying social interaction), and in 2009 was recognized by *Time* magazine as one of 2009’s “*Time 100*”.

It’s likely that people like Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates have had their work cited far more than Fryer—indeed, both have been in the Academy for decades while Fryer is just starting out. Furthermore, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Melissa Harris-Perry are likely more visible. However, I’d argue that, particularly at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, more people’s day-to-day lives are influenced by Fryer.

On December 8, 2008, he appeared on *The Colbert Report*. Stephen Colbert’s introduction:

My guest tonight is an economist studying whether cash incentives will inspire students to learn more. If it works, look forward to Secretary of Education Alex Trebek (Colbert 2008).

Fryer wasn’t on the show selling his recent book—you can’t find any of his books on the bookshelves, because he hasn’t written any. Rather, he was on the show to talk about a program designed to pay poorly performing black children in urban school districts in order to jumpstart their academic performance. Fryer, like many black academics, like many civil rights leaders, like many educators, believe that the racial achievement gap is the civil rights issue of the twenty-first century. When Fryer talks a bit about what this gap means for black academic achievement, Colbert chides Fryer jokingly, noting that even though he (Colbert) doesn’t know whether or not he is black (he isn’t), he believes that what Fryer is saying sounds racist. But then they get to the reason Fryer’s on the show, his novel solution to dealing with the gap.

**COLBERT:** You came up with the idea of paying kids to learn. How does this work?

**FRYER:** We’re in three cities, Chicago, DC, and New York. So in Chicago, for example, we’re taking ninth graders, because they have a dropout issue in Chicago like many other urban districts, we’re losing half of our kids in urban
centers who are not graduating from high school. So in Chicago what we’re doing is paying kids for good grades, hoping to get them on a path . . .

COLBERT: So let’s say I’m a ninth grader, I pull down . . . an “A”.

FRYER: Right.

COLBERT: What do I get?

FRYER: Fifty dollars per class.

COLBERT: Fifty bucks per class??

FRYER: That’s right.

COLBERT: Per year, or like per semester, like what?

FRYER: Per every five weeks.

(Crowd “ooohs”)

COLBERT: That is some long green, my brother.

FRYER: That’s right . . . you’re black now aren’t you?

COLBERT: You know . . . I just might be . . . because I did terribly in school and by your own logic that would make me black.

(FRYER pulls out what appears to be a $50 dollar bill)

FRYER: Well I brought something for you, just in case you ask any good questions.

COLBERT: Alright, ok, let’s see if I can earn that . . .

(Colbert 2008)

The Colbert Report was so important in part because it was so bitingly satirical. Colbert then goes into the question and answer period, beginning interestingly enough with a math question that then leads into a critique.

COLBERT: If Danny gives Johnny $10 to copy his homework, then the teacher gives Danny $50 for turning in his homework for an A, how much money does Danny have left to give to Johnny for tomorrow’s homework . . . the answer is, Danny has no idea because it was his math homework . . . can this . . . isn’t there a danger that the kids . . . I love this, this is the free market making kids learn.

(Colbert 2008)
Here, Fryer agrees with Colbert, and then, after stating that the program hadn’t been going on for that long, makes a case for his approach:

Look, this is an innovation, I’m a guy about innovation in public schools. We are failing so many kids on a day-to-day [basis] that what we really need is to try innovative strategies so that we can close the achievement gap, so this is one such strategy… (Colbert 2008)

I’ve emphasized the role economists play in the neoliberal turn. Scholars like the University of Chicago’s Gary Becker fundamentally changed the discipline of economics—significantly expanding the range of phenomena economists study, and also changing the way economists study these phenomena. Once the idea of human capital becomes fundamental to the discipline, it becomes possible to study everything from how many hours a mother reads to her child, to how political officials decide which issues to focus on when running for office, to the decisions a business makes when attempting to forecast profit margins for the upcoming decade. And once it becomes possible to do that, it becomes possible for economists to problem-solve a wide range of seemingly non-economic issues.

Although Fryer was formally trained at Penn State, he is in many ways a Gary Becker student. And he’s successfully taken Becker’s approach to human capital and applied it to a range of issues affecting education outcomes in black communities, including the “acting white” phenomenon.5 Fryer, like many black academics on the one hand, and the early neoliberal economists on the other, wasn’t simply interested in studying

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5 Ever since Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) argued that black kids didn’t perform as well as their white counterparts partially because blacks associated academic success with “acting white”, people have been focusing on the concept as one of the most important causes of the racial achievement gap. According to Fryer, we can understand the dynamic of “acting white” as a “two-stage signaling process” in which individuals get signals from the labor market on the one hand, which demands certain things for them to get good jobs, and then from their peer network on the other, which demands certain things for them to have friends. “Acting white” occurs when the black student basically makes the decision to develop his human
phenomena for the purpose of understanding them. He studied this phenomenon because he was interested in solving them.

Which brings us back to the initiative he talked about on *The Colbert Report*. While still a professor at Harvard, Fryer took on two initiatives. In 2007, he was hired by the New York City Schools Chancellor to become the “Chief Equality Officer” (CEO) of New York City public schools. While CEO in New York City, over 200 NYC public schools participated in a program in which teachers were given cash incentives to increase student performance. A little more than a year later, after having served in that capacity, he helped to found (and lead) the $44 million Education Innovation Laboratory (EdLabs). The purpose of the lab?

Good decisions are based on reliable scientific evidence. EdLabs provides reliable scientific evidence to support good decisions in education in the United States, particularly the education of minority students and students living in poverty. Our ultimate goal is to close the achievement gap and put ourselves out of business. (EdLabs)

As with many of the examples I’ve presented, venture philanthropy plays an incredibly important role in Fryer’s work. The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation provided $6 million to help kickstart EdLabs, and provided support for much of Fryer’s research in education (Denne 2005). These initiatives enabled Fryer to try a range of projects designed to measure the impact of economic incentives on educational outcomes, and test the
capital in a way that will be rewarded by the market…and is then punished by his black friend network.

Fryer and his co-author do find evidence that in some school contexts black students who get high grades tend to have fewer friends. But, this finding doesn’t really hold in majority black schools, and it doesn’t really hold in private schools—in fact, in private schools *whites with higher grades also tend to have fewer friends than whites with lower grades*. It really only holds in one limited context, in integrated public schools with small black populations. In other words, this phenomenon doesn’t occur in the vast majority of school contexts black students find themselves in.
impact of school-based innovations on school performance. In addition to giving kids money for good grades, Fryer tried a similar cellphone-based program—high performing students in participating school districts would be given cellphones and minutes with an array of apps designed to increase their academic productivity. A number of cities with large black student populations across the country rolled out versions of Fryer’s incentives program, including Chicago and Washington, DC (Hernandez 2008).

In these and other instances, Fryer used neoliberal ideas about human capital and innovation in order to change the way we think about and try to solve the racial achievement gap. Further, though, Fryer used neoliberal ideas about human capital in order to change how children themselves behave. Fryer believes at least one of the reasons why black and poor kids are outperformed by their white and wealthier counterparts is because they aren’t properly incentivized. Black and poor kids perform poorly because they don’t quite see the payoff to investing in their human capital. If they saw the payoff, or if the payoff was made material, by, for example, direct cash payments or nice cellphones, then kids would then see the payoff and would work better.

In each case, Fryer used his training as an economist in order to measure the impact, if any, of the innovations. His findings were weak and not novel to people who’ve worked in the field of education for decades. His proposed incentive structure had no effect on student outcomes in Dallas, Chicago, and New York City (Fryer Jr. 2011).6 Similarly, the teacher incentive program generated no positive results—there were absolutely no differences between teachers who were given cash incentives to perform and teachers who were given no such incentives (Fryer Jr. [forthcoming]). He did find that making a few key modifications to public schools—increasing the school day, spending resources on tutoring, promoting excellence, among other things—increased school quality; however, again, these findings are not novel. Yet and still, the lack

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6 Although the Washington Post article about the Capital Gains program I cite above notes that students did perform better, data from this study wasn’t included in Fryer’s paper.
of new and novel findings do not prompt him, or the cities he works with, to turn back to tried and true pedagogical methods. Rather, his findings, like the neoliberal turn in education itself, are used to call for more (neoliberal) experimentation, are used to call for more (neoliberal) innovation. And everywhere we see them applied, we see the education gap increase, we see support for neighborhood schools fall, and we see support for the idea that education is a public good slowly crumble.

Whether we go back to 1800 when it was illegal to teach enslaved men and women how to read, or to the earliest efforts to create public education in Reconstruction-era America, or to the Du Bois/Washington debates of the early twentieth century, or to Brown v. Board which helped to break the back of Jim Crow, or to the late sixties and early seventies efforts to control local school boards, education has been contested political terrain. This is no less the case now, as the neoliberal turn engenders fierce battles over the meaning of education (do we want citizens or consumers? is education nothing more than human capital development?), over various educational resources (contracts, real estate, per-pupil spending, teacher positions), and over hearts and minds of parents and students themselves. Venture philanthropists have transformed the educational terrain, significantly tilting it in a neoliberal direction, often using their expressed desire to help hard-hit communities to support their interests in changing the face of public education. It’s clear that some of the black political elites, political appointees, and intellectuals involved in the turn involve themselves either because they don’t see another way out, or because they believe this represents the last best hope to defeat the educational achievement gap. However, it’s also clear that some do so out of self-interest. And perhaps a thin slice of these individuals do so out of a desire to gut the concept of the public. As a result, calls for better or more moral “black leadership” are not only insufficient in beating back the turn, but arguably may be counterproductive in defeating it.