The Master's Market: Analyzing the Role of Marketization in Public Education Reform

Undergraduate Research Thesis

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by

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Abstract

Since the Bush administration passed the "No Child Left Behind Act" two decades ago, policy interventions aimed at improving America's education system have embraced a market-based approach, based in the belief that expanding options for choice can improve the quality of public schools and the educational outcomes of marginalized students attending them. But, the efficacy of public-school alternatives that market policies have expanded, particularly charter schools, is widely contested. Further, scholars have criticized how marketization targets and at times exploits the marginalized students in the urban enclaves these policies are most frequently enacted in. Scholars have long recognized the contradiction of market-based reform, but the roots of the marginalization that school choice perpetuates remains widely debated and the introduction of the market only complicated their analyses.

In her famous essay critiquing the academy's habitual failure to meaningfully engage non-normative theory, research, and ways of knowing, black lesbian scholar and writer Audre Lorde states that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never bring about genuine change" (Lorde, 1979, p. 151). In this thesis I borrow from Audre Lorde's analytic of "The Master's Tools" to explore how market-based education policies fail to meaningfully address educational inequity. as Lorde articulates in her 1979 speech on a different matter, market policies have at best allowed educators to "temporarily beat him at his own game" (Lorde, 1979, p 151). That is, produce uneven outcomes that suggest a version of equity but are far from "bringing about genuine change" (Lorde, 1979, p 151). This paradigm, termed "The Master's Market," offers an approach to Critical Policy Analysis frameworks that recognizes the market as a co-conspirator in the maintenance of systemic injustices often attributed primarily to systems of governance.

Key Words: public policy, education policy, neoliberalism, social justice

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"For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never bring about genuine change." – Audre Lorde

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"No school can organize industry, or settle the matter of age and income, can find homes or furnish parents, can establish justice or make a civilized world." – W.E.B. Du Bois

I: INTRODUCTION

In March of 2025, the White House issued an executive order to dismantle the US Department of Education, fulfilling a longstanding campaign promise of the Trump administration.[1] The signing of Executive Order 14242, the "Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities" order, has created shockwaves through our continuously charged political ecosystem, reigniting familiar discourse regarding the scope of the executive branch of government. The claims and promises made over the course of Trump's previous administration have frequently come under scrutiny for potentially inflating the role of the executive branch. Political analysts have largely and understandably focused their interests on the potential sweeping impacts this order will have. To date, thousands of federal workers have lost their jobs in anticipation of the order's signing, part of a massive tide of unemployment caused by executive cuts to government spending that have touched most public industries. Mediating this crisis in the public sector has left little capacity for analysts to recognize this order's position in a decades-long political campaign that will irrevocably change K–12 education in the United States. Despite popular framings in the news cycle, this action is not the

[1] Kwong, Emily (2025). NPR speaks to a former education secretary about dismantling the department. The Public's Radio

political lynchpin of a Trump-era agenda. It is the piece de resistancePièce de Résistance of an education reform movement that originated more than two decades ago, one that promised to create better outcomes for students and families by improving the quality of public-school options. From the Clinton era to Obama, the federal market-based policies of the colloquially termed "School Choice" movement have streamlined an ideological shift in the role of public education. Dismantling the Department of Education is not only a reactionary attack on our nation's schools, but also a declaration that a quality K–12 education is not a right, but a commodity.

The "School Choice" movement's successful framing of marketization as reform has obscured the privatization policies of the early 21st century, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top from reckoning with their failures to provide the reforms they originally outlined. [2] Furthermore, they helped lay the political and ideological groundwork for the dismantling of public education. The Marketplace Theory of public education, one of the first frameworks developed to address the issue of America's failing public schools, contended that expanding options for choice can improve the quality of public schools and the educational outcomes of marginalized students attending them (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Chapman & Donner, 2014; Scott, 2011; Pattillo, 2015). [3] But the efficacy of public-school alternatives that policies such as NCLB have expanded, particularly charter schools, is hotly contested. Further, scholars have criticized how marketization targets and at times exploits the marginalized students in the urban enclaves these policies are most frequently enacted in (Scott, 2011; Pattillo, 2015; Golann,

[2]See Ravitch, D (2013). "The Context for Corporate Reform". *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools Alfred A Knopp*

[3] This article uses "marginalized" to refer primarily to race and class marginalization. I recognize that there is a much larger web of social circumstances affecting one's position of marginalization, but education policy uses this term most often when referring to racialized class disparities demonstrated by the "achievement gap."

2015; Marsh & Walker, 2022). The organizations that have sprung up over the last 25 years since the subsidization of public-school alternatives have found themselves tangled in webs of profit-driven philanthropic capitalism that have plagued the non-profit sector, commodifying public education and the lucrative, state-subsidized, policy measures that coincide with it (Scott, 2011; Ravitch, 2013).

Marketization has not improved our schools, nor has it improved the outcomes of the students most affected by it, nor increased the likelihood of closing the ever illusive "achievement gap." Scholars have long recognized the contradiction of market-based reform, but the roots of the marginalization that school choice perpetuates remains widely debated and continuously clouded in the face of federal backlash (Billingham, 2013). Policy experts have scrambled to diagnose the many systemic forces that color inequality in K–12 education, and the introduction of the market only complicated their analyses.

In her famous essay critiquing the academy's habitual failure to meaningfully engage non-normative theory, research, and ways of knowing, black lesbian scholar and writer Audre Lorde states that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never bring about genuine change" (Lorde, 1979, p. 151). Lorde's essay calls on feminist scholars to better acknowledge "difference" and intersectionality.[4] She argues that dominant analyses produced by feminist thinkers fail to provide genuine solutions because they refuse to engage with the very different realities of poor and black women, and other marginalized perspectives. While Lorde's speech originally calls on Women and Gender Studies, the accompanying metaphor has been

[4] "Intersectionality" is defined here as "a lens through which we can see how various forms of discrimination and oppression intersect and compound each other. See: Crenshaw, K. (2021). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *Droit et Societe*, *108*(2), 465-487–487.

continuously cited by scholars who challenge the extent to which existing institutional mechanisms can facilitate meaningful reform.

In this thesis I borrow from Audre Lorde's analytic of "The Master's Tools" to frame my central argument, that market-based education policy fails to meaningfully address educational inequity because the market prioritizes profit over equity. Rather, as Lorde articulates in her 1979 speech on a different matter, market policies have at best allowed educators to "temporarily beat him at his own game" (Lorde, 1979, p 151). That is, produce uneven outcomes that suggest a version of equity but are far from "bringing about genuine change" (Lorde, 1979, p 151). This paradigm, termed "The Master's Market," offers an approach to Critical Policy Analysis frameworks that recognizes the market as a co-conspirator in the maintenance of systemic injustices often attributed primarily to systems of governance.[5]

II: BACKGROUND

Neoliberalism & The Context of Reform

The landscape of American education reform cannot be understood without a discussion of neoliberalism, which prompted the market orientation of policy (Hess, 2005). In the 1970s, the concept of neoliberalism emerged as a return to classical liberal principles that first appeared

[5] "The Master's Market" evokes Audre Lorde in her essay "The Master's Tools Cannot Dismantle the Master's House" to analyze the role of the market in reifying structural injustices, specifically within public education reform. While Lorde's essay speaks primarily to intersectionality in academia, specifically within feminist thought circles in the 1970s, her analysis has been applied to broader paradigms. This essay recognizes the intersecting forces of race, class, immigration status, disability, among other social classes, in shaping structural marginalization across the US. That said, it will speak primarily to the compounding effects of race and class, as the breadth of education policy studies similarly focuses.

during the Enlightenment.[6] Where classical liberalism espoused the importance of a limited government that would prioritize the self-regulating market (Steger & Roy, 2010), American neoliberal ideology reappropriated classical liberalism to address the economic downturn of the 1970s.[7] Politicians ascribing to neoliberal theory proposed that recentering the interests of the market in governance and policy would remedy the growing deficit, address rampant stagflation, and reignite the period of economic growth enjoyed after World War II (Harvey, 2005). That said, the market orientation of neoliberalism is concerned with more than just a country's bottom line. Its doctrine encompasses all public life, proposing that "human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills" (Harvey, 2005). This belief is demonstrated in accompanying neoliberal policies and modes of governance. Neoliberal governance adopts the free market as a model for government by applying concepts and strategies from the business world such as cost-benefit analysis and efficiency to policy formation. As explained by Steger & Roy in *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction,* neoliberal governance transforms "bureaucratic mentalities into entrepreneurial identities" (Steger & Roy, 2010, p 24), shifting the state's primary material and ideological investments from things such as public good (which the preceding Keynesian era espoused) to profiteering.[8] Thus, neoliberal policies aim to support the state in its endeavor to become more aligned with free-market principles.

[6] Neoliberalism is defined here as: a theory of political economic practices that proposes 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. See: Harvey, D. (2005). A brief introduction to Neoliberalism

[7] See: Steger, M. B., & Roy, R. K. (2010). *Neoliberalism : a very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

[8] See chapter one, "Freedom's Just Another Word...": Harvey, David. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* . Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Neoliberal theorists argue that prioritizing profit is a necessary step on the path towards bettering society, but market-oriented neoliberal reforms often conflict with the public good. This is evident in the policy shifts of the 1990s that fundamentally changed the provision of public services. For example, in 1992, Bill Clinton won his campaign for president with the promise to "end welfare as we know it." In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act upended the former welfare system and put hard limits on federal aid to families. These changes stripped welfare benefits from many recipients and shifted the responsibility of social assistance to local and non-profit entities. While the years immediately after the bill's passage enjoyed a small growth in employment rates, poverty rates only grew. Today, economic disparity continues to define America's populous.[9]

Despite little evidence suggesting these reforms would improve the everyday lives of citizens, neoliberal policies spread to many if not all public services in the US, including schools. During the same period, school reform advocates identified a central problem: the workforce was facing a "tide of mediocracy" in the employment pool, and the poor quality of American public schools was to blame (Ravitch, 2013). They argued that large public-school districts and teacher unions overpowered the interests of families and students, preventing schools from improving and parents from exercising their voice. To address this, policies of this era adopted a strategy of marketization and accountability in public schools. Key reforms of this era include the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and Race to the Top. NCLB purported a combination of mechanisms intending to reform America's education system that prioritized accountability within public schools and districts. Under NCLB, accountability manifested as rigorous testing, high standards,

[9] For a more robust description of this policy's impacts, see: Mitchell B. Chamlin & Joel E. Denney (2019). An impact assessment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Journal of Crime and Justice, 42:4

and harsh consequences for schools that did not meet the benchmarks.[10] School districts labeled "failing" under NCLB were eligible to subsidize charter school alternatives. These alternative schools rapidly expanded after the introduction of Race to the Top, a four-billion-dollar federal grant that built off the legacy of NCLB. Funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 in response to the economic conditions brought on by the Great Recession that began in 2008, Race to the Top opened the door for massive entrepreneurial opportunities, establishing a new market of public and private charter schools to be put in competition with brick-and-mortar options in poorly performing districts where families were desperate for options (Ravitch, 2013). These policies resulted in the scaling of charter schools as a potential solution to the crisis of a failing American education system. Charters could do this by serving as alternatives to underperforming local public schools, simulating competition that would theoretically incentivize school districts to improve.

Neoliberal ideology of the 1970s introduced the idea that free-market policies and governance could solve economic problems in the US. While policy makers ensured that all the neoliberal reforms of this era were backed by supportive rhetoric, the public-school reform movement engaged neoliberal concepts with newfound, unearned legitimacy— they treated these theories as though they were proven to succeed. This is evident in how policy makers approached problems in public education. "Excess" bureaucracy and public infrastructure in city schools were blamed for the massive educational disparities that colored the nation. Subsequently, policymakers insisted these problems ccould, conveniently, only be solved by the

[10] "Accountability" is not a concrete policy or ideology, but rather the broad ways in which the federal government increased monitoring local schools and districts. Particularly, monitoring outcomes linked to performance such as test scores, graduation rates, and use of funding (Ravitch, 2014).

neoliberal, market-based approaches that the two decades prior had cemented as the logical approach to remedying policy failures.

Understanding & Defining Marketplace Theory

In "Politics, Markets, and the Organization of Schools", Chubb & Moe began some of the first discourses that have shaped the marketplace of education implemented through key federal education policies like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. These economists applied the same free-market principles to public schools, situating families as consumers and schools as businesses that the consumer chooses between. Their paper built off an understanding of educational choice known as "the exit option" (Hirschman, 1970). They write: “If parents and students do not like the services they are being provided, they can exit and find another school whose offerings are more congruent with their needs. This process of selection promotes a match between what educational consumers want and what their schools supply.” (Chubb & Moe, 1988, p. 1068).

But Chubb and Moe go on to reveal an incongruence between the ascription of economic principles to the larger marketplace of public education, recognizing that there are barriers to the exit option because public schools often have a “monopoly” over their geographic area. They conclude that this forces many students into schools that aren't serving them. As they situate it, the monopoly has restricted choice and thus the constituents in said market fail to be rational actors. Because these actors are not acting rationally, they are also not making decisions that would influence the market and the businesses (schools) within it to better meet their consumer needs (Hirschman, 1970). Thus, the market also fails to refine itself because its actors cannot make decisions that incentivize it to. They propose, then, that this monopoly is a market failure

that can be addressed by facilitating consumer choice in the form of more school options. Providing more options for choice would begin to balance this market by making the school options compete with one another for families in the district, and thus the process of refinement would begin.

Some twenty years later, Chubb and Moe, alongside thought leaders in alignment with them, have had their vision realized. In many large metropolitan areas, open enrollment school districts have implemented these "freer" markets of education that positions families as consumers of a good, where the "sellers" of that good, that being a quality education, have been placed in competition with each other.[11] Beyond open enrollment systems, many states have adopted private school voucher policies and further charter school subsidies that allow parents to choose options beyond their district schools. A meaningful component of these reforms has been continuously scarce. While this market has been implemented, it remains unclear that it has refined itself. The quality of many public schools is stagnant and the alternatives this market created have generated a host of new concerns regarding the exploitation of students, teachers, and charter school subsidies towards profit-driven motives. The massive school reform movement of the early 21st century was rhetorically framed around doing justice to students, giving them better opportunities, and aspiring to close the ever-elusive achievement gap. It theorized that neoliberal free-market principles would be capable of facilitating this justice through self-regulating refinement. While Chubb & Moe have seen their market realized, thirty years of charter schooling has not produced better outcomes. At best, improvements to student learning are circumstantial and inconclusive. Other researchers' meta-analyses find that charter

[11] See Scott, J. T. (2011). Market-driven education reform and the racial politics of advocacy. *Peabody Journal of Education 86(*5), 580-599

school alternatives continuously underperform compared to their district competitors. (Fabricant, M. & Fine, M, 2011)

III: FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

Theoretical Framework: Audre Lorde as a tool for Critical Policy Analysis

Building from theorists that pioneered critical approaches in disciplines such as Sociology, Black Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and Indigenous Studies, Critical Policy Analysis is a methodological approach that interrogates the epistemological roots of policy, offering viewpoints that attend to power in ways traditionally overlooked in the discipline of Public Policy (Young, 2018). By epistemology, I mean that Critical Policy Analysis is interested in how "ways of knowing the world" inform the solutions that policy makers develop. For example, if neoliberal theorists believe that the world is best understood through free-market principles such as costs and benefits, the solutions they develop to solve worldly problems will rely on these presumptions. If these solutions fail, traditional approaches to policy analysis do not question that failure was because of their worldview. They would instead look to problems still rooted in that presumed world view, such as a monopoly.[12] Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) moves past positivist paradigms that take their assumptions about the world for granted. Instead, CPA interrogates and challenges those assumptions, developing alternative perspectives to view policy and its implementation. CPA does this work in four fundamental ways:

[12] For a more thorough explanation of Policy Analysis approaches, see: Marshall, C. (1997). Dismantling and reconstructing policy analysis. In C. Marshall (Ed.), *Feminist critical policy analysis: A perspective from primary and secondary schooling* (pp. 1–39). London: The Falmer Press.

1. They focus on the difference between policy rhetoric and policy outcomes.
2. They focus on a policy's roots and development. Particularly, how the dominant culture might play a role in that development.
3. They are interested in the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge.
4. Lastly, CPA interrogates how the distribution of power in a system, often related to historical legacies of racism or class disparity, might affect a policy's implementation.

Audre Lorde's critique of "The Master's Tools" parallels CPA approaches by interrogating how systemic differences created by race and class create power imbalances.[13] While her essay focuses on power within feminist thought circles, the way she speaks about marginalization has been applied universally.[14] This essay uses a CPA framework inspired by Lorde to explore the interests of market-oriented education reforms. Evoking the "Master's Tools" is appropriate for this project because market-based policies reveal themselves to be interested in profitability and economic growth, forgoing equality and public good in the process. Where Lorde spoke of the "Master's Tools" creating disingenuous discourse in feminist thought circles that failed to account for racially marginalized women, the "Master's Tools" in market-based education policy do the same. The sections that follow explore where this has been most evident in the surrounding literature and within a specific case. In both cases, the most systemically marginalized among us suffer the consequences for those in power relying on tools

[13] Here, structural racism refers to: societies in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). For a more robust description of structural or systemic racism, see: Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997). Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation. *American Sociological Review, 62(3),* 465)-480.

[14] For examples of cross-discipline applications of "the Master's Tools", see: Meagher, K. (2025). Decolonizing Development Studies: Rejecting or Repurposing the Master's Tools? European Journal of Development Research. Or: Bell, B. (2021). Towards abandoning the master's tools: The politics of a universal nursing identity. Nursing Inquiry, 28(2), 1–12.

developed by a "Master" or "dominant" system. The "Master's Market" appropriates Lorde's critique, using the Market as a stand-in for tools. This conflation is made to express how education reform policies have embraced neoliberal approaches to solve problems beyond their necessary contexts. As the following paper will illustrate, the market has been adopted as a tool to address issues beyond its scope such as systemic inequities in public education.

CPA frameworks differs from other critical approaches in their interest in more than just the *nature* of certain phenomenon, but also policy's role in facilitating such phenomenon. While CPA questions epistemological roots of policy, it maintains the perspective of Policy Analysis, believing that policy is what shapes the world. Given this belief, CPA tasks itself with continuously comparing a policy's rhetoric to its material outcomes. It does not take rhetoric at face value, but rather analyses the many social, political, and cultural undertones of policy rhetoric which in turn provides a more informed understanding of policy failures. When a policy fails, CPA frameworks provide analyses that go beyond the limits of "goals and outcomes" by interrogating the sociopolitical contexts that guided its formation. Thus, this research is guided by two central questions regarding "The Master's Market."

1) How have market policies been adopted in education reform?
2) How has this adoption impacted equity within public education?

Methods: Multifocal Approaches to Critical Policy Analysis

This thesis explores the nature of "The Master's Market" through two approaches. Firstly, a literature review was conducted to establish central themes within the discourse surrounding marketplace theory and K–12 privatization. The themes identified three central themes regarding the adoption of market policies in education reform: 1. The Rhetoric of

Marketization, 2. Constraints to Choice, 3. Public Interests versus Private Goods. These themes then abductively informed the approach to analyzing case study data. This approach was taken in consideration of CPA frameworks, which appreciates the value of theoretical and methodological alignment. The size of this body of research did not allow all themes regarding neoliberal education reform to be explored, nor were they all relevant to the scope of this essay. Instead, themes were identified based on prominence, credibility, and relevance to the CPA framework.

Secondarily, this thesis conducted a multifocal case study on the education policy ecosystem in the state of Ohio. Ohio was chosen because of its prominence within the contemporary School Choice movement. The state has passed several bills shifting the allotment of K–12 education resources to private and non-profit organizations and is home to national research and advocacy organizations on both sides of the debate around school choice. Data was approached with an abductive approach based on findings from the literature review. Analysis hoped to uncover how the adoption of market policies has impacted equity in Ohio's public school system.[15] The case draws on several forms of data surrounding Ohio's school choice ecosystem. It builds from the bottom up, first focusing on the schools themselves, then the management organizations that facilitate their operation, and finally the lobbyists and policy makers closely entangled with these organizations.

[15] This article uses "equity" to speak about the equal distribution of public goods and services in acknowledgement of historic tendencies that systemically disadvantaged marginalized groups. For more, see: Frederickson, H. G. (1990). Public Administration and Social Equity. Public Administration Review, 50(2), 228.

IV: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Rhetoric of Marketization

The NCLB era laid the foundations for a contemporary School Choice reform movement that overwhelmingly advocates for market-based policies in public school systems and districts.[16] Where School Choice is broadly interested in expanding the ability of families to choose their best fitting school option, marketplace theory attributes the current problems within education to a market failure best addressed by dismantling the "monopoly" public schools have on their districts. The school choice movement isn't guided by one specific framework. It is an ideological stance that has been addressed by several interventions such as school vouchers, open enrollment, or even urban mobility (Sugarman, 2004). This has been widely recognized by scholars of education, who have often theorized that alignment between liberal school choice proponents and conservative marketplace theorists is due to a "strange bedfellows" situation or phenomenon interest convergence (Pattillo, 2013).

The alignment of school choice politics with marketplace theory has given K–12 privatization greater legitimacy and ideological power. It is representative of a broad swath of opinions ranging from parent autonomy to equal opportunity, but the normative opinions of school choice advocates often fail to address how this movement materializes within public school policies. These advocates, being a part of the broader school reform movement, should be aligned in wanting better schools for all children, yet school choice proponents often conveniently sidestep how making schools more like free-choice markets creates an environment where families are burdened by the facilitation of "choice" in their districts.

[16] "School Choice" encapsules the policy and advocacy push to diversify and provide alternatives to brick-and-mortar public schools (Pattillo, 2015)

Constraints to Choice

A prevailing theme within CPA research assess how and if marketization increases the extent to which families are truly able to "choose" the options made available to them, and whether that choice satisfies the needs of students (Burris, n.d.). Marketization has been enveloped into the school choice movement as a policy response to the ideological movement, and researchers have continuously struggled to identify what prompted this alignment. Early analyses concluded that this was a case of "strange bedfellows" or interest conversion, in which unlikely accomplices (that being historically conservative privatization advocates and progressive school choice advocates) found themselves supporting the same policies. This was to the massive benefit of the politicians, entrepreneurs, and the newly subsidized independent schools they had co-created. As they would soon find out, school choice was not a new movement but a decades-old battle for parental autonomy and civil rights (Arsen, 2023).

It would be a vast understatement to say that racialized barriers to school choice are evident in America's history. Rather, those barriers *are* the history of public education in America. Attempts to constrict the educational attainment of blacks in America predate our country's founding, as slaves within the colonies were kept from reading, writing, and most all forms of learning not directly linked to their servitude (Johns, 2024). Moving into the 20th century, landmark civil rights cases made access to education the stake upon which greater claims to the freedom and autonomy of black Americans rested upon. It is along this logic that black school choice advocates may situate their bid for freer markets of education, and along that logic where they fail to capture the full picture of what choice requires. These advocates should be aligned in wanting better schools for all children, yet school choice proponents often

conveniently sidestep how making schools more like free-choice markets creates worse schools and thus worse choices for those families who are more constrained in their ability to choose.

There is no one way to assess school quality, but the compounding effects of marketization have been illustrated across several dimensions associated with the quality of public schools and their equitable distribution. These include but are not limited to improving student performance over time, providing education that facilitates improved achievement, providing safe, affirming, and appropriate learning environments, adequate funding, and so on. Patterns of privatization in education have habitually produced schools with less funding, poorer student performance, high attrition rates, less regulation, and less satisfactory learning environments.[17] Both these negative and positive outcomes are highly inconsistent in charter schools due to their lack of regulation. This itself causes an additional issue of equity because it makes it difficult to ensure students attend schools that fit their needs and aspirations. Increasing the number of schools in a district or diverting the management of those schools to private entities does not make education more equitable if those schools still fail to provide students with outcomes comparable to those in well-resourced suburban districts.

In "The Everyday Politics of School Choice in the Black Community," Mary Pattillo articulates the limits to agentic power faced by black parents in the open public school district of Chicago. There, families have numerous public and charter options to choose from and are not constrained to their local neighborhood school. Though families are legislatively "free to choose," time, money, and transportation present meaningful and often impenetrable barriers to

[17] For a more thorough article on assessing equity in charter schools, see: Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (2009). Multiple choice: Charter performance in 16 states. Stanford, CA: Stanford University.

families taking advantage of the options that present themselves. Regardless of the options, parents continuously reported feeling as though they were choosing between the lesser of evils, picking schools as a means of harm reduction rather than making confident and empowered decisions (Pattillo, 2015). Further, the public options that best rival schools in well-resourced, predominantly white suburban districts were admissions-based charter schools that require additional research, paperwork, testing, and sometimes even interviews for a chance at admission. These are resources that the most marginalized students and families don't have access to, penalizing them for their own circumstances (Pattillo, 2015) and ultimately excluding them from many of the school options they've been presented with.

Whether it be by mandated school segregation or simply buying a home in a neighborhood with less poor, black, or otherwise unwanted children, affluent white families have always found a way to choose. The school choice movement attempts to make agency more accessible, but fails to recognize that agency itself, the very ability to choose, is constructed along race and class lines. This is demonstrated within open-enrollment systems that don't accommodate families who are too economically or socially burdened to take advantage of the school opportunities that they theoretically have equal access to. Mandating open enrollment may facilitate the idea of autonomy, but the additional barriers within these systems reinforce the idea that "accessing a quality public good should require work in the first place" (Pattillo, 2015, p 63). This attitude parallels the "bootstraps" mentality of many neoliberal reforms that prioritize individualism over systemic change. By enforcing agency as a stand-in for progress, these subsequently blame individuals for not taking opportunities they were never given meaningful or equal access to in the first place (Kaminski, 2022).

Private Interests and Public Goods

Chubb & Moe's foundational argument for K–12 school marketization hinged on the belief that placing public schools in "competition" with each other would allow parental (consumer) interests to be more readily enacted (Chubb & Moe, 1988). This would become possible because the advent of choice would force schools to meet the needs of their constituents, or they would simply lose them to other school options. But this model only works if consumer interests are truly the focal point of these supposed markets, and if vendors and consumers are the only actors influencing these education ecosystems. Chubb and Moe diagnosed the "vested interests" of educational bureaucracy as a central barrier to meaningful reform, believing that these institutional oversights were what prevented parental driven reform. But as their vision for a marketplace of public education has come to fruition, "vested interests" have continued to color education policy, those being the market interests that gained political relevance as education policy embraced privatization. This was spurred by initiatives like Race to the Top, the massive federal subsidy program that gave thousands of dollars to participating states to go toward innovating public school alternatives. This bill was specifically designed to scale up entrepreneurial activity in the public sector and create new markets for investors. In Denver, Colorado's first year of Race to the Top, for example, more than 35% of funds went towards private investors (Ravitch, 2013). Thus, venture philanthropy, strategic investments that use venture capital finance and business management strategies to achieve philanthropic goals, has gained significant prominence within education policy spaces, and the economic interests of such organizations continues to color the networks of advocacy that these organizations have created and moved within (Scott, 2011).

These interests are evident in the framing of prominent issues within education and the policies through which market advocates insist these issues can be solved. For example, document analyses of prominent right-wing education think tanks find that these organizations habitually frame the reformation of education as an issue of civil rights, while failing to call for any broader social policy reform (Scott, 2011). Their media discourse evokes normative assertions of universal equity "while obscuring how economic and social arrangements created by market mechanisms remain intact" (Hernandez, 2022, p 41). Charter networks and sponsors have also frequently been caught in tangles of financial turmoil often intertwined with the mistreatment of teachers, staff and students[11] While these problems are far from unique to charters, critical policy analysts have observed that privatization of the once public good of education allows the interests of these school networks to stray further from equity precisely because of the business model they now find themselves integrated within (Marsh & Walker, 2022).

Where the rhetoric of marketization has allowed for the argumentative alignment of school choice reform and private entrepreneurship, compelling research demonstrates that the opportunity for choice does not equate to meaningfully reforming the quality of schools that families have access to, nor increase their autonomy (Pattillo, 2015; Butler, 2024). Further, the market model can incentivize the entrepreneurial organizations that capitalize off school choice reform to prioritize their earnings over preserving education as a public good. With this interest in mind, advocates turn to strategic campaigns asserting that a quality education is a civil right, while failing to account for the vast array of factors that make quality education possible beyond a fabrication of equal "choice".

V: THE CASE: OHIO'S SCHOOL CHOICE MARKET

Alongside several other states in the past two decades, Ohio has been dominated by the Republican-led EdChoice movement which advocates for the expansion of K–12 options through the proliferation of charter schools and private school vouchers (Burris, n.d.) Since the introduction of NCLB, quantitative outcomes, primarily test scores, have been the "selling" point of competing public school alternatives. This has historically left little room to consider the quality of these institutions aside from their ability to produce the best data. "No Excuses" schools are one model of public charters that have come to dominate both that market and the discourse surrounding it. "No Excuses" models are named for their attitude of high standards, that there is "no excuse" for school districts to underperform. These institutions are known for their exacting academic and behavioral standards achieved through a reliance on punishment that mirrors carceral approaches in line with the school to prison pipeline(Ben-Porath, 2013; Buck, 2022; Golann, 2015).

In Ohio, these schools run similarly, with an educational model that emphasizes strict discipline, high academic standards, and personal responsibility. These schools aim to create a structured environment where students are expected to adhere to clear rules and lofty expectations, with the belief that such an approach can help overcome socioeconomic barriers. Additionally, they implement strict discipline policies, focusing on behavior management with clear rules and consequences to foster a focused learning environment. In Ohio, notable examples of "No Excuses" charter schools include the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) network and the Academy of Urban Scholars. These institutions have received both praise for

their achievements in student performance and criticism for their strict policies and high turnover rates among teachers and staff.

Data

Quantitative case data were collected from the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, which annually reports metrics on all of Ohio's K–12 schools, both public and private. This case focuses on a group of 13 charter schools across the state, all of which are managed by the same sponsor organization. In Ohio, sponsor organizations are the private or non-profit entity that operate public school alternative charter schools. The schools selected come from geographically diverse areas of Ohio across the state. Though the Fordham institute sponsors close to 25 schools as listed on their website, several of these schools have been consolidated into a single institution for reporting purposes, so it is impossible to get individualized reporting on certain schools. Additionally, several of the schools listed by the Fordham Institute were not traceable through the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce's databases, suggesting they are no longer operating or were not reported or registered within the state. The schools selected were:

1. Dayton Leadership Academy
2. DECA Ohio
    a. DECA High
    b. DECA Middle
    c. DECA Prep
3. IDEA Greater Cincinatti Inc.
4. KIPP Columbus

5. ReGeneration Avondale
6. ReGeneration Bond Hill
7. ReGeneration Middle
8. Sciotoville Community School
    a. Sciotoville East Jr/Sr. High School
    b. Sciotoville Elementary Academy
9. United Preparatory Academy
    a. United Prep East
    b. United Prep State Street

Apart from the Sciotoville schools, all the schools sponsored by the Fordham Institute are in or near urban hubs in Ohio's largest cities. Three of these schools are in Cincinnati, three are in Columbus, four in Dayton, and two in Portsmouth, Ohio, a small city on Kentucky's border. The students at these schools fit the characterization of charters previously described, being largely low-income and minority.

The schools were measured on several indicators of performance. The first indicator is proficiency. This performance measure reports the percentage of students who have scored proficient or higher on state tests. This measure was chosen because NCLB and the current accountability practices we have for school quality in Ohio are reliant on achievement on standardized tests to benchmark school quality, though we know this is not the only indicator of success. Historically, charter advocates have justified criticisms of the "No Excuses" culture by emphasizing their students' high empirical outcomes. So, measuring schools performance standards allows one to see whether these schools are achieving the standards they prioritize and

lay claim to. Using the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce's Report Portal, proficiency data is available for all public charters. Qualitative data came from a variety of sites. Textual [or discourse] analysis was conducted on Ohio's school Report Card system, a tool through the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce that provides data on school performance, attrition rates, "gap closing," and other measures. Textual or discourse analysis was also conducted on each school's website, news articles from local outlets in and around each city, and on the publications of the charter sponsor organization that operates the selected.

Findings

TABLE 1: Average Proficiency on English and Math Tests for "No Excuses" Charter Schools

School	Average Proficiency
Dayton Leadership Academy	40.30%
DECA Ohio (Aggregate)	46.10%
IDEA Greater Cincinnati	25.60%
KIPP Columbus	33.60%
ReGeneration Avondale	17.10%
ReGeneration Bond Hill	23.00%
ReGeneration Middle	18.10%
Sciotoville Community School (Aggregate)	55.90%
United Preparatory Academy (Aggregate)	51.80%
Charter AVG	**34.60%**
State AVG	**58.39%**

Source: Ohio Department of Education and Workforce[18]

As shown by the table above, the average charter proficiency for the selected sample is less than half of that of the state average proficiency. Despite "No Excuses" claim to rigorous

[18] All DECA schools, Sciotoville Schools, and United Prepatory Schools were reported to the Department of Education under a single aggregate schools: DECA PREP, Sciotoville Community School, and United Preparatory Academy. Because of this, the data on the three schools that fall under this title could not be disaggregated.

academic standards, the schools are falling far behind the state average, with the worst school, ReGeneration Avondale, reporting an average of a mere 17.1%. Though these results are damning on their own, Urban charters do task themselves with serving largely structurally disadvantaged, which could potentially skew their proficiency to a lower rate because they are trying to cover more ground in terms of advancing their students. In an attempt to more holistically capture the quality of these charters, the average Achievement, Progress, and Gap Closing of these schools was also measured. These measures come from Ohio's "Report Card" tool, which gives ratings from 1–5 stars. The Ohio Department of Education assesses schools yearly and rates them with star values based on aggregate data in each category. It then averages each rating to provide an overall rating from 1-5. The achievement rating is based on the Performance Index Percentage which like English and Math scores, is based upon state test proficiency. The progress measure examines how students advance over time, comparing the growth of their scores on state tests to expected growth. Finally, the Gap Closing component (echoing the educational achievement gap the school reform movement focuses heavily on) shows how well schools are meeting the performance "expectations" for students. These expectations are based upon the proficiency of students across demographic categories like socioeconomic status, race, disability, and English Language Learner Status. A school's ability to improve retention, graduation rates, and chronic absenteeism also fall into this measure. The Gap Closing measure is important for these charters because they advocate for being the better option for students of marginalized backgrounds whose local schools would be less capable of closing the educational achievement gap.

TABLE 2: 2023 Report Card Scores of "No Excuses" Charters in Ohio

School	Rating (overall)	Achievement	Progress	Gap Closing
Dayton Leadership Academy	3	1	4	4
DECA OHIO (Aggregate)	3.5	2	4	4
IDEA Greater Cincinatti	3	2	5	2
KIPP Columbus	3	2	2	3
ReGeneration Avondale	1.5	1	1	1
ReGeneration Bond Hill	2.5	2	3	2
ReGeneration Middle	3	1	4	2
Sciotoville Community School	2	2	2	1
United Preparatory Academy (Aggregate)	3.5	2	5	5
Average	**2.8**	**1.6**	**3.1**	**2.8**

Source: Ohio Department of Education: School Report Cards[19]

On a five-star rating, the performance of the schools fails to be much more than the median 2.5/5 stars, and is particularly low on overall achievement, measuring an average mere 1.6 stars. It is concerning that the "progress" and "gap closing" measures are not here, because these measurements are based on a school's ability to improve its student's results over time and their ability to close the educational achievement gap. These charters self-advocate for their ability to produce exceptional outcomes in this regard but are not measured to be doing so.

A central function of charter schools is to provide alternative options to children in underperforming school districts, and because of this, charters tend to be situated in low-income urban hubs. The placement of this group of schools remains consistent with that ethos, but the performance of the districts themselves outpaces the charter schools at every collected site. During the 2023–24 school year, every district had a higher overall score than that of the No Excuses charter(s) operating in its district. District achievement, while still low, was also rated as

[19]All DECA schools, Sciotoville Schools, and United Prepatory Schools were reported to the Department of Education under a single aggregate schools: DECA PREP, Sciotoville Community School, and United Preparatory Academy. Because of this, the data on the three schools that fall under this title could not be disaggregated. The ReGeneration schools were reported individually.

equal or higher for each school. These data demonstrate that "No Excuses" charters are failing to be better performing options for students in poorly rated districts, as the charter options themselves have worse ratings than the districts as a whole.

TABLE 3: District Rating and Achievement of No Excuses Schools

School Name	School District	School Rating	District Rating
Dayton Leadership Academy	Dayton CTPD	3	4
DECA OHIO	Dayton CTPD	3.5	4
IDEA Greater Cincinatti	Cincinnati CTPD	3	3.5
KIPP Columbus	Columbus City CTPD	3	4.5
ReGeneration Avondale	Cincinnati CTPD	1.5	3.5
ReGeneration Bond Hill	Cincinnati CTPD	2.5	3.5
ReGeneration Middle	Cincinnati CTPD	3	3.5
Sciotoville Community School	Scioto County CTPD	2	4
United Preparatory Academy	Columbus City CTPD	3.5	4.5

Source: Ohio Department of Education: School Report Cards[20]

On all collected measures, Ohio's "No Excuses" schools underperformed by state and district standards. Though some of these schools report year after year growth and do specialize in certain areas with some success, the consistency and magnitude of low charter performance at these sites is concerning. It becomes that much more problematic when considering the missions, values, and outcomes these charters lay claim to. Common themes among the vision statements across these schools include academic excellence, college readiness, and most importantly providing equal access to high-performing schools for all students. Despite their cited missions, Ohio's "No Excuses" charter schools continue to underperform. Instead of providing quality

[20] All DECA schools, Sciotoville Schools, and United Prepatory Schools were reported to the Department of Education under a single aggregate schools: DECA PREP, Sciotoville Community School, and United Preparatory Academy. Because of this, the data on the three schools that fall under this title could not be disaggregated.

options and district competition, these charters fail to meet state-outlined standards. While test scores and federal ratings have their cited problems, charter expansion was pioneered underneath these metrics. These are the metrics that school choice policy has created to justify charter school expansion, and yet, they fail to meet these self-identified standards.

A Note on Qualitative Impacts of "No Excuses" Education

Through an overreliance on testing, NCLB, Race to the Top, and its accompanying reform movement rewarded models of education that produced the highest data-driven outcomes (Ravitch, 2014). Over the past two decades, "No Excuses" schools have received praise for their culture-driven orientation that relates to improved student performance. The culture fostered by these institutions has also been widely problematized by scholars and educators (Golann, 2015; Marsh 2022; Ravitch, 2013), as this model's reliance on punishment and conformity threatens the growth of character and self-esteem. Though the exact conditions vary greatly, from schools with strict zero-tolerance policies, where students cannot speak unless spoken to, or where police frisk them daily, the overarching theme of these institutions is punitive coercion in pursuit of behavior modification and outcomes. While many schools employ methods that try to foster certain values in their students, the means through which "No Excuses" try to do this are troublesome because they rely on methods that position the student as unreliable and defective. Cultural mottos in these schools such as "SLANT" (Sit up straight, Listen attentively, Ask and answer questions, Nod your head, Track the speaker with your eyes) are potentially over corrective as they reward conformity and punish attempts at self-expression.

"No Excuses" charter schools primarily serve marginalized students that are more vulnerable to the negative consequences of the restrictive culture fostered by these institutions. In

"The Quest for Compliance in Schools," Joan Goodman notes that educationally marginalized children often "live without the security provided by predictable and constant care," making them "prone to develop an internal model of the self as unworthy, ineffective, and incompetent" (Goodman, 2013, p 15). Whether intentionally or not, punitive schools can take advantage of the unstable low-esteemed model of the self that can develop due to the traumatizing effects of poverty, food insecurity, family incarceration, or immigration. These educational models often assert that the culture adjustments in these schools lead students towards their "better selves" (Goodman, 2013). This promotes a troubling idea that students themselves are to blame for their inability to perform in ways comparable to their better-resourced peers, who are less affected by the compounding effects of systemic racism and class disparity. "No Excuses" schools force marginalized students to internalize messages that they are inherently defective and that their achievement rests not only on hard work and personal responsibility, but on a reorientation of the self toward obedience and conformity. Underneath this model, students cannot trust themselves or their own image of self-actualization.

Despite the conservative charter advocates in Ohio in favor of the punitive model of "No Excuses," there are real impacts to school environments that create fearful, negative associations with teachers and institutions of learning (Ben-Porath, 2013). As seen in Table 4, the absentee rates at these schools are extremely high, averaging nearly 60%, more than double the state average. This high number is not explained by the students served by these charters. The average chronic absenteeism rate for economically disadvantaged students, which charters in general and these "No Excuses" schools overwhelmingly serve, is only 38%. Even when broken down by district, the disparity remains. While the overall absentee rate in the Cincinnati Public School District is still very high at 43.4%, the rate among the "No Excuses" schools in that district,

IDEA Greater Cincinnati and ReGeneration Schools have absentee rate well above—in one instance, more than three times that of— the district state average.

Being an entire phenomenon of schooling on its own, the "No Excuses" model itself cannot be ignored as a potential causal link explaining these high absentee rates. Put simply, environments that prioritize testing data, restrict student voice, and value punishment to curb expressions of freedom do not seem likely to foster positive associations with schooling. This is not to definitively suggest that this curriculum model is to blame for creating high absentee rates, or that these institutions should adopt a laissez-faire model where students don't encounter any kind of challenges. But one must consider how any school associated with absentee rates at this size would be able to improve students' outcomes if they are chronically absent.

TABLE 4: 2023–24 Chronic Absenteeism Rates at "No Excuses" Charter Schools in Ohio

School	Chronic Absenteeism Rate
Dayton Leadership Academy	40.30%
DECA	27.70%
IDEA Greater Cincinnati	68.70%
KIPP Columbus	44.90%
ReGeneration Avondale	83.20%
ReGeneration Bond Hill	68.50%
ReGeneration Middle	84.50%
Sciotoville Community School	55.90%
United Preparatory Academy	51.80%
Sample Average	**60.65%**
State Average	**25.60%**

Source: Ohio Department of Workforce and Education[21]

The "No Excuses" model threatens the development of the students subjected to such harsh modes of schooling but has been justified as an intervention because charter school

[21] All DECA schools, Sciotoville Schools, and United Prepatory Schools were reported to the Department of Education under a single aggregate schools: DECA PREP, Sciotoville Community School, and United Preparatory Academy. Because of this, the data on the three schools that fall under this title could not be disaggregated.

advocates link the model to success. In Ohio, conservative charter advocates continue to favor the punitive model of "No Excuses," praising the return to so-called "traditional discipline" and its potential to "save our schools."[22] Marketplace theory and the broader school choice reform movement allows these models of schooling to expand because they're an integral part of the increasingly privatized education system. By placing the emphasis on the individual and ignoring the weave of systemic forces that influence a student's outcomes in school (Golann, 2015), marketplace theory targets marginalized students with a punitive curricular model that continuously underperforms. Despite consistently low quantitative outcomes, these schools continue to receive ample support and generous public funding, spinning practices of public shaming and student indoctrination into "fostering a culture of excellence.".[23] From either an accountability and marketplace perspective or one that values the egalitarian "soft skills" of public education, there is no logic that justifies the expansion of "No Excuses" charters because these institutions fail on all these metrics.Legislators and policy advocates have continued their expansion and gotten away with using the language of social justice and reform to substantiate the import of these initiatives. Their doing so suggests that they've adopted the "entrepreneurial identity" prioritized by those that subscribe to neoliberal solutions to systemic issues (Harvey,2005).

VI: ANALYSIS

As the above reporting shows, No Excuses charter schools in Ohio fail to meet state standards and perform at levels comparable to the districts they're located in. Despite this, charter advocates continue to win fights for increased support and funding. This incongruence is a

[22] Bielski, V. (2024). Can a return to traditional Discipline save public schools? *Real Clear Investigations*
[23] Bielski, V. (2024)

contradictory but increasingly common phenomenon. It begs the question of why school choice continues to be a policy priority if it produces such disparaging outcomes? For example, in 2019, Ohio enacted a grant program that was the first of its kind in the nation. The Quality Community School Support Fund (QCSSF) provides additional per-pupil dollars to support high-performing public charter schools, known as "community schools" in Ohio. Eligible schools had to meet one of four criteria:

(a) The school's sponsor was rated "Exemplary" or "Effective" on the sponsor's most recent evaluation.

(b) The school received a higher Performance Index score than the school district in which the school is located on the two most recent Ohio School Report Cards issued for the school.

(c) The school received an overall rating of four stars or better for the Value-Added progress dimension on the most recent report card issued for the school or did not receive a grade for the Value-Added progress dimension on the most recent report card.

(d) At least 50% of the students enrolled in the school are economically disadvantaged.[24]

The Quality Community School Support Fund increased statewide charter spending by $30 million dollars annually, while the public-school budget allocations have remained stagnant for 3 years at $600 million (Churchill, 2021). Upon closer examination, some of the biggest advocates of the QCSSF happen to also be its own direct beneficiaries. The Fordham Institute, which sponsors the charter schools examined above, also worked directly with legislators on the passage, implementation, and analysis of this bill. As seen in Table 5, several of their schools were eligible and received QCSSF funding, bolstering their earnings. The Fordham Institute's most recent report details the bill's impact over the last 4 years, revealing mixed achievements. It

[24] [24] Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (2024). Quality Community School Support Fund. *Ohio Department of Education and Workforce.*

uses regression discontinuity to compare schools that narrowly missed the criteria outlined by the QCSSF to schools that narrowly attained funding (Lavertu, 2024). While this method is innocuous on its own, a closer look at the reports reveals that one of the two major findings, that students attending qualifying schools made greater academic progress in the classroom due to QCSSF funds, is reliant upon a highly controversial method that equates standardized test value added scores with days spent learning in a classroom. In the past, scholars of education policy have problematized this method because it requires making many assumptions about what comprises a school day and its value, while also assuming that it can be captured by scoring differentials on standardized exams. The practice is known for its failure to authentically capture student experiences (Baird & Pane, 2019). Despite this, the report ultimately contends that QCSSF funds gave students more than a month's worth of additional learning. This is one of the most tangible metrics of progress the report gives but is also dependent upon a disingenuous method that the report fails to elaborate on or justify.

The report described above is one of several research publications from the Fordham Institute on Ohio education policy. Their reporting maintains that Ohio benefits from school choice policy and is progressing toward better outcomes for all its students, but research from other analysts suggests the opposite. In sharp contrast to this assertion, Ohio is ranked 46th in the nation for the equity of its distribution of K–12 school funding (Pruitt, 2023). The central mission of the Fordham Institute is to promote educational excellence for every child, yet their research and advocacy seems to purposefully cloud the realities of educational inequity in Ohio.

TABLE 5: QCSSF Eligibility

School Name	QCSSF Eligibility
ReGeneration Bond Hill	Ineligible
ReGeneration Middle	Ineligible
ReGeneration Avondale	Ineligible
KIPP Columbus	Eligible
DECA	Ineligible
Sciotoville Community School	Eligible
IDEA Greater Cincinnati	Ineligible
Dayton Leadership Academy	Ineligible
United Prep State Street	Eligible
United Preparatory Academy East	Eligible

Source: Quality Community School Support Fund

The relationship between the Fordham Institute, the policies it sponsors, and the schools it manages is representative of a nationwide tendency emerging in advocacy of elite conservative networks that influence policy by "inform[ing] common sense understandings of what is possible and desirable for [it] to accomplish" in the first place (Scott, 2011; Domhoff, 2006, p 586). The research produced by Fordham primarily serves to further their own political project by self-defining what successful outcomes are and hand-picking the ones they attribute to their policy interventions. When convenient, many of these advocacy organizations claim to care about normative, social justice-oriented education principles such as improving outcomes, boosting upward mobility, and increasing college readiness, but conveniently sidestep how the policies and schools they support fail to provide these things. This is exemplified by the Fordham Institute's entanglement with education policy in Ohio, where they play central roles in advocating for policy that directly expands their organizations' funding and produce research that clouds the true efficacy of that policy.

When taking a closer look at the Fordham Institute's publications, more inconsistencies arise between their broad normative assertions of educational justice and the true stances and

priorities of the organization. Alongside their recent report on the QCSSF, the Fordham Institute habitually produces research that simultaneously undermines race and class disparities in education and inflates the potential role school choice plays in rectifying such inequities. A recent policy brief, "Think Again: Are Education Programs for High Achievers Inherently Inequitable?" responds to the popular and well-evidenced critique of gifted programs and their tendency to self-select along racial lines with a call not to reduce these programs but expand them. When addressing the massive phenomenon of gifted programs under-identifying marginalized students due to biased practices, Fordham responds with "perhaps" (Wright, 2024). In a more journalistic op-ed that critiques David Brooks' piece in the December 2024 edition of The Atlantic, "How the Ivy League Broke America," Fordham responds with the following: “Wow! Whew! At this point—about halfway through Brooks’s essay—one might expect him to erect a guillotine, summon up a firing squad, quote Karl Marx, or at least urge lottery-based entry to everything from CalTech to McKinsey & Company, from neurosurgery to the ranks of general and admiral, to Rhodes Scholars and poets laureate. Surely we should demolish (or use random admission to) Stuyvesant High School, as well as David’s alma mater, the Ivy-adjacent University of Chicago” (Finn, 2024).

In a tone that can be described as nothing but mocking, the Fordham Institute makes light of what scholars of social justice would recognize as some of the most pressing issues in a deeply unjust hierarchy of education. By conflating calls for increased equity in elite institutions to political violence and radical communist ideology, Finn, the author of the piece, states in no uncertain terms that equity is not a concern that education policy advocates should take seriously. Or at least not the kind of equity that doesn't unequivocally support school choice. The institute's publications reaffirm the earlier observation of advocacy organizations attempting to

redefine policy priorities to match their own vested interests and incentives. On its own, educational equity does not suggest a certain policy priority and is likely to be a widely supported cause. But advocacy organizations like the Fordham Institute successfully redefine these vague normative values to match the policies they will benefit from, and do not shy away from attacking progressive stances deemed incongruent with their mission.

The Fordham Institute is one example of elite charter organizations entangled with their state legislature, even sometimes "becoming cash repositories to be siphoned of sponsorship and management fees, in some cases by politically connected individuals," Ravitch describes White Hat Management in *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (Ravitch, 2013, p.169*).* White Hat Management, the former largest for-profit charter management company in Ohio, was driven out of business in 2011 after an unredeemable financial controversy in which their employees sued (and won) the founder for poor business practices and a lack of financial transparency (Staff writer, 2019). Yet the Fordham Institute has been a consistently vocal supporter of White Hat Management and its founder, stating that their work in the charter movement "should be applauded" (Speranza, 2011). There are many examples of charter organizations mismanaging funds, abusing staff and students, and pursuing morally troublesome ventures. While this is not unique to charter organizations, it defies school choice advocates' earnest belief in a future where privatization allows students and families to drive the direction of their schools through competition. Dense, profit-driven relationships between non-profits, researchers, politicians, and sponsors involved with school choice policy allow the motives of K–12 schools to stray far from providing students with equal, competent education and instead introduce economic motives that consistently fail to consider equity. This is demonstrated through the Fordham Institute's ability to simultaneously

conduct work in all four of these arenas by managing charter schools and lobbying for their expansion, using research they sponsored and conducted as evidence for their success. Over the last two decades, the marketplace model has claimed to be able to save our schools and futures, when it has done little more than line the pockets of so-called advocates who only speak of equity insofar as they can use it as a political punch line.

VII: CONCLUSION

This article has detailed and challenged the logic coloring the school choice education reform movement from a critical theorist perspective, using data on Ohio's high-performing charter schools and advocacy networks to exemplify national trends in the privatization of K–12 education. First, it laid the ideological groundwork of the school choice movement. Afterward, it more closely examined and challenged the idea of "choice," revealing meaningful barriers to the options provided by the free market of public education. After this, the article pivoted toward a case study on Ohio's "No Excuses" charter schools and the organizations involved in school choice policy. Despite concerningly poor outcomes, Ohio's charter schools continue to receive generous funding, not unlikely due to the vested interests and research of elite advocacy organizations.

The inconsistency between the values and outcomes of Ohio charter school advocacy organizations parallels that of the larger theoretical incongruence of school choice as a justice-oriented policy intervention. The Fordham Institute exemplifies this by asserting normative values of educational equality while simultaneously bashing diversity in education and sponsoring poorly performing charter schools with chronically absent students. School choice rhetoric relies on the ambiguous belief that families should be empowered to make decisions

regarding their education, making it easy to associate with policy interventions that prioritize social justice. But the ambiguity of this policy platform is its very danger. Normative assertions of parent autonomy allow school choice advocates to escape reckoning with the how marketplace theory, school privatization, and charter expansion exacerbate racialized class disparities in our schools through false constructions of "choice," districts that reify segregation, and curriculums that threaten the empowerment of vulnerable student populations. Rather than facilitating the competitive market for success that marketplace theory predicted some three decades prior, failing school districts are facing a scarcity of resources as money is siphoned to charter alternatives, while the families within said districts must choose whether to subject their children to hostile school environments that promise unsubstantiated success. That is, if they possess the resources required to take on open enrollment systems in the first place. In Ohio, the success of this system seems faulty at best, but the pull of charter advocacy organizations entangled with the state allows resources to continuously pour into them. These findings affirm the phenomenon of education policy that allows private actors to "co-opts the status quo" (Chapman & Donor, 2014), rewarding organizations for interventions that maintain the unequal balance of power in an increasingly hierarchical system of education.

Ohio's charter and school choice advocacy ecosystem is one example of a far larger problem of neoliberal reforms that create markets and entrepreneurial opportunities in place of costly structural changes that would allow for minorities to meaningfully challenge their current conditions underneath capitalism (Chapman & Donor, 2015). Such conditions require policies that address not test scores and student posture, but concentrated poverty and racial segregation. Diane Ravitch, who has gone from a Bush Administration proponent of No Child Left Behind to a staunch public education advocate, again offers us important words of reckoning with the

failures of the free-market educational reform movement spurred by her very own work. She writes:

> We know what works. What works are the very opportunities that advantaged families provide for their children. In homes with adequate resources, children get advantages that enable them to arrive in school healthy and ready to learn. Discerning, affluent parents demand schools with full curricula, experienced staff, rich programs in the arts, libraries, well maintained campuses, and small classes. As a society, we must do whatever is necessary to extend the same advantages to children who do not have them. Doing so will improve their ability to learn, enhance their chances for a good life, and strengthen our society (Ravitch, 2013).

As she states, we know what works, and we see it across many other developed nations with strong welfare states, social support infrastructures, and real community schools, institutions that provide education oriented toward addressing the comprehensive barriers to socioeconomic mobility. Though normative attitudes of parent autonomy and equal opportunity may allow school choice advocates to escape reckoning with the incongruence between their policy model and solutions that get at true determinants of student success, this thesis has illustrated this enduring phenomenon. The free market of public education has allowed entrepreneurs to redefine policy priorities as the ones most congruent with capitalistic gain. The failure of neoliberal reform in education policy is that much more damaging because it jeopardizes the lives and futures of children through pursuing market-based alternatives to meaningful reform, subjecting them to hostile institutions of learning that produce the outcomes most explicitly tied to profit. These are the masters' tools, and yet again, they have failed us. The question now is whether we can make the difficult endeavor to build new ones.

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