

# The Marketization of Education: Public Schools for Private Ends

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*This article argues that the neoliberal renaissance of the 1980s marketized education, with distinctly negative social consequences. We examine the emergence and promotion of a national-level discourse that positioned schools in the service to the economy. Based on ethnographic research conducted in North Carolina, we then show how local growth elite utilized this discourse to further their own race and class interests to the exclusion and detriment of poorer, African American parents and students. We suggest that ethnographic studies of policy formation help to socially and historically contextualize contemporary debates and denaturalize unwarranted assumptions about the public good.*

Over the past 30 years, the United States has witnessed massive economic, political, and cultural changes. Dominant views of the appropriate relationship between the state and the market shifted considerably, as proponents of neoliberalism convinced power brokers and the general public that a strong market, free of government interference, would provide desired prosperity. More recently, neoliberals have advocated the application of market principles to institutions formerly reserved as “public,” such as schools, some medical services, or prisons. In this article we argue that neoliberalism has reduced opportunities for social equity and democratic participation.

During this period, public education became “marketized.” By *marketization*, we signify the intensified injection of market principles such as deregulation, competition, and stratification into the public schools. Business models and corporate influence have long affected education (see, e.g., Counts 1927; Katz 1970). The advent of tracking in the early 20th century to prepare immigrant students for working-class jobs and the consolidation of schools along the factory model are the most spectacular examples of their sway. However, we argue that the neoliberal

economic and political transformations under way in the United States have renewed and altered the privileged position of corporate rhetoric in educational debates.

Marketization takes many forms, discursive and structural. Primary among those is the unqualified celebration of "choice" in schooling, whether as vouchers, charters (also known as "public school choice"), or magnet schools. The rhetoric of choice positions parents and students as consumers of schooling; it implies that all parents are equally informed, politically connected, and capable of securing for their own children the best education. Yet early studies caution that such policies easily result in increased race and class stratification. Researchers have carefully documented the negative political and social effects of choice rhetoric (Gewirtz et al. 1995; Johaneck 1992; Whitty et al. 1998), vouchers (Ball 1993; Molnar 1996), and charter schools (Cookson 1994; Dougherty and Sostre 1992; Henig 1994; Wells et al. 1999). Marketization also occurs through outsourcing of school functions or through outright privatization of administration, as when schools are run by for-profit organizations.<sup>1</sup> The proliferation of school-business partnerships (Boyles 1998; McGuire 1990), as well as a more general pro-business climate in and around schools (Boutwell 1997; Gelberg 1997; Hanson 1992) represent marketization. In a move reminiscent of de-skilling and the increased supervision of work known as scientific management, the radical expansion of testing reduces education to rote memorization of basic facts and standardized outcomes, rather than creative exploration of ideas and construction of knowledge. Using standardized tests as the sole arbiter of performance consistently disadvantages poor or\* minority students (Darling-Hammond 1991; Kohn 2000; McNeil 2000; Swope and Miner 2000).

But ethnographic research reveals subtler, less-evident consequences of marketization: a remarkable cultural change in the perception of school's purpose. Economic uses of education have come to outweigh other goals that Americans have historically attached to the public schools: individual intellectual and character development, the formation of an informed and\* patriotic citizenry, the expansion of social mobility, and the creation of a more socially just society (Katznelson and Weir 1985). The discourse of "schools in the service of the economy" has achieved a hegemonic, "common sense" status, granting elite race and class interests an unchallenged legitimacy in local debates. The dominance of market rhetoric privileges wealthier, white parents and students, precisely those groups favored in regular market transactions. Market influence has been normalized, obscuring the complicated political and ideological work that led to its renaissance. This has caused business interests to be overrepresented in local policy debates, in task forces or on school boards (Ray and Mickelson 1990, 1993; Sola 1989). The resurrection of neoliberal logic and the naturalization of economic uses of schools at this particular historical moment have elevated busi-

ness involvement and\* conservative designs on education policy development while inhibiting democratic debate and marginalizing other claims on the public resource of education.

In what follows, we examine the consequences of market principles' renewed dominance in public educational politics, documented during 12 months of fieldwork in the state of North Carolina. We explore the national discursive, political, and cultural conditions that promoted the discourse of schools in the service of the economy. We then turn to the local level, where we found that local elites used the virtually uncontested celebration of economic growth and their enhanced authority in education debates to shape schools to their own ends. Specifically, they positioned schools as an amenity to attract mobile capital and professionals in ways that reserved (for their children and their class) educational resources for upward mobility. First, however, we discuss the theoretical framework of our argument and we situate this study methodologically, geographically, and politically.

### **Critical-Discourse Analysis: A Theoretical Framework**

Our argument regarding the impact of macrolevel discourses on microlevel policy and practice is informed by critical-discourse analysis (Jaworski and Coupland 1999; van Dijk 1997). Building on Foucault and other theorists, critical-discourse analysts interrogate the relations between discourse and power. A *discourse* is a representation proffered and sustained by a particular group or groups. Wealthier, higher status groups have more power and money to circulate their discourse, granting it a greater authority. Discourses compete with rival representations in order to become the dominant depiction of an issue or idea. When a discourse achieves dominance it becomes naturalized, meaning that it loses its connection to particular ideologies and interests and comes to hold the status of "common sense" (Fairclough 1989). Such is the case in our ethnographic material. The idea that schools should serve the economy was rehabilitated and magnified during the 1980s by political conservatives and representatives of corporations. It then circulated widely through the conservative research institutions, state- and local-level policy circles, and the media, until it came to hold the status of "common sense," especially among the growth elite (see below).

In particular, our ethnographic material represents an instance of what critical-discourse analyst Norman Fairclough calls "commodification," which is "the process whereby social domains and institutions, whose concern is not producing commodities in the narrower economic sense of goods for sale, come nevertheless to be organized and conceptualized in terms of commodity production, distribution, and consumption" (Fairclough 1992:207). Commodification involves the "colonization" of realms of social life by discourse types associated with commodity production. This is indeed the state of affairs in the United States, which for the past 15 years has witnessed attempts to introduce

the language, logic, and principles of private market exchanges into public institutions. We call this phenomenon the marketization of education.

### **Situating Our Knowledge: Context, Methods, and Engagement**

The data in this article hail from a larger ethnographic study of the relationship among economic restructuring, local political participation, and cultural change. That study was funded by the National Science Foundation, with Dorothy Holland, Catherine Lutz, and Don Nonini serving as coprincipal investigators. We conducted fieldwork in five North Carolina sites with distinct economic, political, demographic, and cultural characteristics.

We conceived of this collaborative research project as an intervention in and interruption of prevalent narrow and formalistic conceptions of democracy. We aimed to examine native perceptions of economic change and to probe the social forces shaping political action and inaction. From early in the research process, we embraced the goal of conducting *public anthropology*, or anthropological research and writing that engages in and informs public debates around issues of economic and political participation and exclusion (Borofsky 2000; Peacock 1997). Our research design and analysis results from that epistemological standpoint.

In each of the five sites, we followed local educational debates and tracked the relevant discourses. Because of space constraints, in this article we present ethnographic data from only two sites: Halifax and Durham counties. The data here rely on the 20 structured interviews concerning local educational debates in Halifax and Durham counties, plus 20 supplementary interviews conducted with local economic developers, school board members, teachers, and parents of school-age children. We also employ field notes from participant observations conducted at sites such as school board, county commissioner, and city council meetings.

The marketization of education discussed here was prevalent in Cumberland and Chatham counties as well, which, like Halifax and Durham, were aggressively recruiting new industry and\* young residents, offering education as “the new amenity.” The discourse was less pronounced in Watauga County, where local economic developers had abandoned the attempt to lure industry in favor of promoting the county as a tourist and retirement destination. For a fuller consideration of each site, see Holland et al. (in press).

### **The National Level Political–Economic Context of Educational Change**

A complex concatenation of economic and political factors made possible the renewed dominance of market logic in school-policy delibera-

tions. During the 1980s, the middle class shrunk considerably through the upward transfer of wealth, the immense layoffs of middle management and hiring freezes implemented by big corporations, the mushrooming of personal debt with the intensification of credit marketing and anxious strides to maintain middle-class status, and the offshoring of manufacturing jobs that caused a shift to lower-paying retail and service jobs that required more work hours and offered fewer benefits (Newman 1988; Reich 1991; Schor 1991; Sklar 1995). The resulting "status anxiety" (Mickelson and Ray 1994) broke the social compact forged between the middle class and the poor during the 1960s. Feeling squeezed, members of the predominantly white middle class abandoned support for redistributive social policies and safety nets such as welfare and affirmative action (Ehrenreich 1989). Remarkably, the uncertainty did not cause the middle class to question their support for a neoliberal economic system; instead, it disciplined them to accept more fully the rush to remain competitive, seek more training, work harder and longer, and reserve for themselves resources generating upward mobility that suddenly seemed sharply limited. Quality public education was chief among those resources. The goal of social equity through education, codified as *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and desegregation policies, was gradually eclipsed by economic uses of schools.

Political factors assisted the marketization of education. Chief among them was the New Right's attack on public schools and the overwhelmingly Democratic public teachers unions. In the widely circulated 1983 publication *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform\**, a task force appointed by former President Ronald Reagan blamed the schools' supposed "rising tide of mediocrity" for America's slipping economic competitiveness.<sup>2</sup> CEOs of megacorporations like Xerox and IBM invested significant amounts of economic, political, and social capital to publicize such charges. Companies deflected attention from their own contributions to school failure and economic recession: the flux their new mobility created; the benefits and low tax rates they wrangled from cities that competed over their relocation; and the layoffs they instigated, creating instability and economic uncertainty in families. By "manufacturing a crisis" in education (Berliner and Biddle 1995), conservatives directed the public's frustration over generalized economic insecurity in the face of deindustrialization and economic recession toward the schools. President Reagan, and especially former Education Secretary William Bennett, reinforced the economic attack with a rhetoric of American moral decline, fomenting resentment of the government's enforcement of the Constitutional separation of church (Christian prayer) and state (schools). The message appealed heavily to middle- and working-class white males, made angry by the erosion of their economic, gender, and race privileges (Fine et al. 1997). Finally, renascent racist and classist biological and moral explanations of inequality made it easier

for the middle class to abdicate the pursuit of social equity (Apple 1996). During the 1980s, conservatives framed the poor as a disreputable and undeserving "black underclass," which obscured poor whites and racialized poverty. Further, they claimed that social programs for the poor created a "drag" on the economy (Mickelson and Ray 1994:216). Each of these factors contributed to the declining support of social-equity goals.

In essence, the "schools as scapegoat" line allied disparate social groups:

(a) dominant neoliberal economic and political elites intent on "modernizing" the economy and the institutions connected to it; (b) largely white working-class and middle-class groups who mistrust the state and are concerned with security, the family, and traditional knowledge and values and who form an increasingly active segment of what might be called *authoritarian populists*; (c) economic and cultural neoconservatives who want a return to high standards, discipline, and social Darwinist competition; and (d) a fraction of the new middle class who may not totally agree with these other groups but whose own professional interests and advancement depend on the expanded use of accountability, efficiency and management procedures that are their own cultural capital. [Apple 1996:91]

Neoliberals intimated that schools exist to boost national economic performance, and they proposed business people as those best qualified to craft education policy. Neoconservatives were appeased with promises of input on curriculum, and the social evolutionists were placated with promises of standardized testing and "accountability." Thus, the Right engineered a "conservative restoration" by coalescing (sometimes conflicting) neoconservative and neoliberal interests around a politically convenient target—the public schools.

Catalyzed by that particular political-economic nexus, the marketization of education has continued unabated on a national level. In the 1980s, the White House implemented the New American School Development Corporation "to raise private money for design teams expected to 'reconceptualize' education" (Shipps 1997:77). President George Bush called for privatization, deregulation, and competition between schools. Failing to pass national voucher legislation, Bush instead joined with governors to establish Goals 2000, which included increased standardized assessment of students, schools, districts, and states and provided for extensive private-sector involvement (e.g., in the basic research and development of Goals 2000 strategies; see Borman 1996; Cookson 1995). President Bill Clinton continued Bush's National Goals 2000 and its National Skills Standards Board. Clinton pressed for more extensive standardized testing and advocated charter schools, while welcoming Congressional lobbying on education policy by corporate allies. Since the 1980s, business-oriented educational lobbying has heavily targeted Congress; for example, the conservative Heritage Foundation distributes a congressional briefing book for new members with a chapter dedicated to business-friendly education (Mickelson 1999:498).

Even more importantly, the marketization of education and the emphasis on business involvement in education policy filtered quickly to the state and local level. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) instigated more than 300 state and national business reports and commissions assessing the public schools (Ray and Mickelson 1990). In 1989, the National Business Roundtable “began a campaign to encourage its state and local affiliates to work with state governors in an effort to radically restructure the nation’s public schools” (National Business Roundtable 1990; Shipps 1997:77). Both that organization and the National Alliance of Business have circulated pamphlets instructing CEOs and business groups how to shape local school policy toward economic restructuring goals (Shipps 1997:76). Research institutions played an important role in the diffusion of this revolution. Many well-known conservative education proponents, such as Diane Ravitch, Chester Finn, Bruno Manno, Theodor Rebarber, and Dennis Doyle, have circulated through prominent research institutions, such as the Brookings Institution, the Manhattan Institute, the Fordham Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Hudson Institute, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Using surprisingly partisan research from even “nonpartisan” think tanks like the Brookings Institution (see, e.g., Chubb and Moe 1990), conservative education proponents have extensively tutored congressional representatives, governors and local policy makers. For example, Chester Finn and Theodor Rebarber held a series of workshops for Southern governors at Vanderbilt University in the 1990s (Finn and Rebarber 1992).

Hence, in the early 1980s, a group with very particular economic and political interests blamed recently integrated public schools for national economic insecurity. Their rhetoric insisted that the proper goal of schooling was individual and national economic competitiveness rather than social equity. Powerful institutions, such as research institutions, presidential commissions, business organizations, and the media circulated and normalized this discourse. Economic uses of schools dovetailed with neoliberal efforts to curtail the public sector, resulting in the increasing marketization of education.

### **“Growth Comes Through Education”: North Carolina’s Model Performance**

National and state trends provided the discourse that has shaped local debates. These political-economic and discursive conditions set the context for school-policy debates across the United States in subsequent decades. In order to show how marketization unfolds at the local level, we now turn to case studies conducted in three North Carolina communities.

North Carolina exemplifies economic uses of public schools. Over the past two decades, few have done more to propagate the belief that educational investment leads to economic growth than four-term North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt. Upon his first election in 1976, Hunt,

a classic “modernizer” within the Democratic party, identified education as the mechanism to address the racial and labor image problems dogging the state in the postintegration period (Rothenberg 1984).<sup>3</sup> He increased appropriations significantly, funding teacher salary increases, training grants, the employment of teacher aides in early elementary classrooms, huge investments in early childhood education, and the institution of a statewide science and math magnet school. During his hiatus from the governor’s office in the 1980s, Hunt promulgated the “growth through education” approach nationally by cochairing the National Task Force on Education and Economic Growth, a public–private advisory council, with Carnegie Corporation President David Hamburg. Since his reelection to the governor’s office, Hunt has continued to support education within a narrowly meritocratic frame. Responding to conservative national trends, he has adopted market-inspired and\* business-friendly programs in the schools: mandated competition between individual schools through standardized testing (the “accountability” program); a ballooning charter-school program that is having a disturbing segregating effect; and “school to work” grants that provide new avenues for business involvement (job shadowing, mentoring, classroom adoption, and so forth).<sup>4</sup>

### **Growth for Whom? The Social Consequences of Education’s Marketization**

The marketization of education was evident during our fieldwork. Charter schools were multiplying, the accountability program was implemented and standardized testing expanded, business-organized education foundations (fund-raising groups) flourished, districts implemented school-to-work programs, and business interests were overly represented on education task forces (as well as on school boards). However, perhaps the largest marketizing influence came not from any specific program, but from the general “growth” discourse. During our fieldwork, a surprisingly large number of people expressed a belief that good schools are necessary to attract businesses and\* maintain a healthy economy. Although widespread, this argument was particularly salient among the “growth elite,” people such as professional economic developers, realtors, large landowners, bankers, owners of retail and service-based businesses, and chamber of commerce representatives who stand to gain from the restricted economic development under way in North Carolina.<sup>5</sup> The rhetoric of strong educational systems as the lure for business has radically expanded during the last 30 years, when capital’s new mobility has forced rival prospective sites into competitive bidding. But their reliance on education posed a serious dilemma: The growth elite wanted to offer exclusive, reputable schools to attract relocating professionals, yet they needed to avoid contentious charges of racism or classism. Indeed, their intended economic uses of the schools proscribed eq-



uity concerns. The rhetoric of economic growth allowed them to resolve this quandary.

### **“White by Design”: Halifax County**

Halifax County is part of the poorer, traditionally agricultural eastern third of the state. Its de facto segregated school districts resulted from a hyperdependence on a textile industry that manipulated racial differences to depress labor costs, creating racialized and segregated classes. In the early 20th century, textile magnates donated land and money for the construction of a town school; in exchange, they secured business education and industrial-arts classes and a future white labor pool (Conway 1979:116). One-room schoolhouses, with significantly fewer resources at their disposal, spread throughout the county. Segregationists took advantage of arbitrary historical boundaries to declare racialized school districts. In fact, Roanoke Rapids essentially expelled its remaining minority school population. The city had one black school: the Chaloner School. The school board argued that of the school’s 1,100 students, only 300 lived within town limits. So they ceded the school to the county for four years, while the county built new schools to house the 800 county black students. Then the city reappropriated it and by 1971 it was a predominantly white middle school (Conway 1979:115). Segregated districts, and internal segregation by schools, proved a feasible solution until federally mandated integration prompted many white county students to flee to the private schools that sprouted overnight.

Segregation continues undisturbed in the county’s three school districts. In 1995–96, Halifax County schools were 86 percent black, Weldon city schools were 92 percent black, and Roanoke Rapids city schools were 77 percent white. Given the differing economic bases, as well as social class and racial composition of the cities and county, it is not surprising to find a considerable difference in per pupil expenditures and performance on standardized tests between the school systems. According to a Halifax County–sponsored survey in 1994, two-thirds of Halifax students were reading below grade level (*Roanoke Rapids Herald* Nov. 7, 1996\*). In 1996, on the SAT scores of 121 school systems, Weldon placed last and Halifax 117th, while Roanoke Rapids ranked 43rd. In fact, two of the four schools in Weldon were among the 15 lowest performing in the state that received “assistance teams.”

The intermittent debate over the merger of Halifax’s segregated systems illustrates the predominance of economic interests and discourse over concerns for racial equity. The different concerns and justifications used by black and white parents were striking. Black parents, without hesitation, denounced the current arrangement as unfair and detrimental to black students. Many favored merger but coldly accepted that white power interests would never allow it to transpire. The demonstrated hostility of whites to the topic checked black aspirations for more equitable schooling arrangements. Parents specifically feared “submit-

ting” their children to such hostility from white teachers or peers in a merged system. During a research interview, one parent commented,

We wouldn't want to subject our children to a lot of hostility just to say that they're in a better, or, they're getting a better opportunity. For instance, last year was the first time that we've had black students to go to private schools. . . . Would I send my kids there? No. It might be better. They might get better educated. I don't have the slightest idea. But I would not send my children there. And the reason I say that is because it has always been a white-only\* school. Just because you have a minority there, it might change the outlook, but not necessarily the inlook. See what I'm saying?

Other black parents calculated the destruction of black political control that a merger would bring. Communities suffered heavy losses during integration, when black schools were shut down and black teachers and administrators lost their professional positions (Cecelski 1994). Many parents remembered the absolute dearth, until recently, of black educational representation. The first black representative was appointed to the Roanoke Rapids school board only in 1970; the county's third district, Weldon (predominantly black), achieved a majority black board only when granted the right to elect members in 1984. Parents recognized that merger would eliminate black administrators, black teachers, and black culture from the schools:

[Whites are] controlling. I see the white power structure in Roanoke Rapids. If you look at their central office, you might find two blacks. The rest are whites. See this stuff is outdated. It shouldn't be that way. If you look at your principals, what do you have in leadership over there? *All* white. If you look into the schools, you might find one black teacher among all the teachers. . . . Because see, the way they're set up, our kids wouldn't see a black teacher. They could go through the whole day and never experience being taught by a black teacher. It would be white oriented. We lose a lot of values that way. We lose a lot of culture that way, because whites, they do not understand.

Those more cognizant of black political and cultural losses in integrated systems argued for the maintenance of separate systems but under more equitable funding arrangements. As one county policymaker said, “We got to go the same distance that Roanoke Rapids goes. We get enough gas to get halfway there and we got to push and pull to try to get there, but we get there. Give us the same amount of money and we'll get there when you get there. And that's the way I feel about it. We don't need merger. What we need is equity in funding.” Yet, although Roanoke Rapids and Weldon schools voted their own supplemental taxes, race and class politics in the county have precluded increased county taxes for school funding. The same school board member continued,

We had [a supplemental tax proposal] about eight or ten years ago, which the county commissioners, the politics in the county, didn't support. . . . The black board members supported it [but others didn't]. Most of the resources in this

county are in the white community. The black community should have supported the bond issue—it wouldn't have cost them that much because they didn't own anything that much. . . . And when you talk about tax increase in Halifax County, you know, you're hitting the people that own the resources in the county. . . . When we ran we got a two-percent\* increase. When the other commissioners ran two years prior to that they got a two percent reduction. So it's a nip and tuck kind of thing.

Wealthy, white county landowners, who themselves placed their children and grandchildren in private schools, continuously mobilized the opposition of the county's poor whites with the facile antitax rhetoric, supplemented by charges of "school mediocrity" and implications of biological intellectual inferiority. These race and class politics simultaneously obstructed tax increases for county schools and system merger, perpetually fueling the reproduction of inequality.

White parents enjoying the benefits of the city school system justified the continued segregation in two ways: as tradition, and as economically feasible. Proponents of the segregated system use words like *community*, *tradition*, *identity*, and *loyalty* to defend their opposition to merger. For example, a Roanoke Rapids politician claimed publicly that a merger would damage "community spirit." A city school board member said "we want to keep our identity." This rhetoric accorded with the larger neoconservative discourse on restoring community values and tradition in schools. In the Halifax case, "community" and "identity" euphemistically camouflaged acts of institutional racism. Likewise, a city administrator argued,

Well it's been said that there is a move on at the state level to have 100 school districts just like 100 counties, and the saying in Roanoke Rapids is, when we're down to 101, Roanoke Rapids will be number 101, because there's a loyalty, and the fact that the school district is small, we have like 3,200 or 3,300 students. . . . And it has nothing to do with trying to set ourselves apart and say, "We're better than you," or anything like that, it has more to do with a certain, a loyalty and a feeling of more like family and not wanting to be swallowed up in a larger entity so that we would lose our own identity.

This discussion of tradition ignored the historical struggles over the institution and maintenance of school district borders.

Further, wealthier white city residents took for granted the economic advantages enjoyed within those arbitrary borders, ignoring the fact that the borders resulted from specific practices and policies to concentrate development in the white area of the county. One white city educator posited,

One reason Roanoke Rapids does have, has had a better school system is because the, we have our own tax base here. And people who go to this school system, they live inside the school district and have to pay a little bit higher tax,\* which goes directly to the school system. So, we can offer higher supplements for teachers to come in. And so we can pick out better teachers to come

in. But now if there's merger, then I don't have to pay this higher property tax because then I can move out to the country and my children can go wherever. And the real estate values will go down. Because some of these houses, these big fancy houses you know, who's going to buy them if there's no special school system to keep people together? You know.

Her comments implied the universal desirability of separate systems that maintain housing stock (above equitable education). The supplemental school tax allows the white middle class to be selectively and locally communitarian, while ignoring rural distress.

White parents and teachers in the city system naturalized the advantages of their students, attributing it to "higher standards" and better "quality," as evident in the comments of the following teacher:

Well, really, it's sort of like Roanoke Rapids has always had higher standards and the kids have excelled more here. In the other systems the standards have been lower, the attendance has been bad. It hasn't been equal education. It hasn't been quality education out there. And I really think if we merge, instead of having one system out of three that is achieving some learning, I think we'll just have three that don't do anything.

Notably, in the midst of her comments she admitted that the education provided is unequal, and then immediately covered by using the word "quality" (rather than "equality") to explain the difference. Similarly, although a white city administrator attributed the success of systems like Chapel Hill to an advantaged population, he credited "expectations" for his own system's success: "Traditionally, we score, our students score pretty well on standardized tests, and the SAT, certainly nothing like Chapel Hill, but we don't have the highly educated population to draw on that the Research Triangle area does, but our students for our area do well on tests because we have high expectations and high standards." Whites frequently talked about the need to bring the other systems "up" before merger is conceivable. "Why tear a good thing down?" one informant queried. He feared it "would lower the standards in the Roanoke Rapids school." Yet they never proposed how to improve the two predominantly black systems.

Issues of taxation and school funding point to the firmest base for the maintenance of these segregated systems: The current arrangement encourages economic development, because the town offers "at least one good school system." As one former city school board member explained:

When you're talking about economic development, attracting industry, you know this is one of the first things that they look at when an industry is getting ready to come into an area. "What type of educational system do you have?" Roanoke Rapids graded school district has been a drawing card for what business and for what industry that has come to the area, hasn't been a lot, but it's

been some, and I think that's been a part of it by Roanoke Rapids being in the top 10 percent school systems in the whole state.

People in positions of power, who stood to benefit from development, worked to ensure the continued separation of the systems. A large landowner who served on the Halifax county school board for more than a decade reasoned this way:

Merging would no doubt help the Halifax system, but it would damage Roanoke Rapids city system, and then I think the doctors and lawyers would leave the city to pay for education elsewhere. . . . We know [Halifax] schools are in trouble, but I would hate to see the only school that is halfway right be taken over by the county. . . . I'm not sure what to do. I don't know if it would bring to ruin the manufacturing out in Roanoke Rapids, or what it would do. That's our biggest tax base in Roanoke Rapids. That's where all the jobs and manufacturing is in Roanoke Rapids. And those folks won't come into Halifax County and put their kids in the county schools. So what would it do economically for the county?

The county school board member implied that everyone in the county should support whatever policies promote the economic development of the town, because such development would eventually "trickle down" and would benefit a great number of residents. But this is inaccurate in many ways. The economic development experienced in Halifax County has benefited a remarkably small number of people, while the remainder of the populace continues working full time while experiencing near-poverty incomes\*. Further, such a rhetoric of economic utility obfuscates a key question: Who bears the cost?

The predominantly black student bodies of these two underfunded school districts bear the costs in two ways. First, they must continue to attend poorer quality schools in order to keep one system attractive for prospective industries. Second, the location of development in Roanoke Rapids at the expense of other areas of the county further marginalizes those areas, because a system with an industrial base can levy higher taxes without unduly burdening property owners and, therefore, can dedicate even more money to educational facilities and teacher supplements. Hence, the economic development of Roanoke Rapids, thanks largely to the maintenance of race- and class-segregated school systems, generates a downward spiral from which the other systems are unlikely ever to recover. Thus, an alliance of white county landowners, private-school owners (at least one of whom served for more than ten years on the county's school board), city-school parents, black city politicians (whose silence on merger was the price of election), and a few black separatists continually deprived the large majority of Halifax's poor or\* black students an equal education.

### **From Private Interests to Public Good: Business Involvement in Durham Public Schools**

The economic use of schools to attract business and young relocating professional families proved a major concern in Durham County, as well. Durham's experience with desegregation and, later, merger, echoes themes presented in the Halifax case. In the wake of integration, white flight from the city to county or\* private schools left two separate, almost totally segregated systems, with vast disparities in resources and quality of education. When occasionally broached, the topic of merger was squelched by white middle-class animosity and black middle-class concern that merger would deny them professional positions as well as influence over the education of black students. Local elites had little reason to support the merger, because the maintenance of separate systems encouraged the relocation of mobile industry and knowledge workers to Research Triangle Park (RTP) and the suburbs of Durham. However, by the late 1980s the chasm of disparity between city and county schools prompted the state legislature to threaten a takeover.

The merger plan developed under duress over several years, amidst foot-dragging by many county teachers, parents, and students and charges of racism from middle-class black activists. The historical animosity between some black and white political leaders, the vehement opposition of many county teachers to merger, and the racialization of poverty in Durham set the stage for heightened race and class tension within and surrounding the schools. The tacit issue behind merger negotiations was class privilege, although race featured most prominently in discussions. One informant said, "The question became, 'How do you establish a school system that meets the needs of middle-class black and white students when there is a 50 to 60 percent disadvantaged minority population?'" Tension was exacerbated during the 1997 superintendent search by the selection of a white female over an equally qualified black male in a school board vote split four-\*three along racial lines.

Magnet schools with racial quotas were set up to integrate several of the traditionally African American city schools. Middle-class parents anxiously secured advantages for their children by advocating elaborate tracking systems within the schools that essentially kept their children in socioeconomically homogeneous classrooms. With tracking to satisfy vocal white parents, few advocates remained for the education of the students remaining in "regular" classes, whose parents lacked the connections and social capital to have them transferred. These students were, as educator Lisa Delpit aptly phrases it, "other people's children" (1995)—children whose welfare was beyond the concern of those with power in the system.

In the wake of merger, Durham schools developed a negative reputation that sent some builders out of the county and into neighboring Wake, Orange, and Chatham counties. This diversion of residential dol-

lars prompted real estate interests to become involved with educational issues. As one seller's agent explained,

I was fighting to try to get this [student code of conduct] changed, and of course, get these stats [statistics on violation of conduct] down, because Durham was getting a bad name. Since I sell real estate, that's part of that image problem, and I'm just trying to get my nose in there to help solve it.

The attempt by business interests to "clean up the schools" in order to foster economic growth, paired with the entree provided for business interests in the aftermath of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), prompted Durham's Chamber of Commerce to become more formally involved in educational issues through a variety of means. A participant described the chamber's school-to-work (also called "Job Ready") program as an attempt to join a "community focus" and a "capitalist focus," because "there is no split between the two." The chamber was drawn into policy decisions when, in the first year of merger, members began complaining about "disruptive" students in their children's classrooms. One white developer and parent, John, explained:

My son would be in some AG [academically gifted] classes and some regular classes. And when he was in the regular classes, there were disruptive students which prevented him from learning. And this bothered him and it bothered me. . . . I didn't want those classes disrupted so that's why I became involved on a personal level, which happened to translate to a more system-wide level being in the position I was at that time with the chamber.

John found nothing amiss in the unusually high influence on the process that his class position granted him, while he felt free to judge youth of a different class and race. Following the merger, "disruptive" became the dominant code word for poor minority students. Much like the later "at-risk" educational discourse, "disruptive" prejudicially references a host of stereotypes about race, class, family, and behavior. John and his colleagues felt the schools should find an orderly, unobtrusive way to make these students into "productive citizens." The phrase strikingly amalgamated the democratic discourse of citizenship and the economic discourse of productivity, while positioning students as products of state structures.

Members' complaints forced the chamber into a difficult situation: They needed to develop a solution that would both satisfy chamber members and prevent further damage to Durham's image in national business realms and among relocating companies and employees.<sup>6</sup> The chamber sought a mechanism to further stratify the schools and, hence, appease the relocated business community, but in a way that would avoid charges of racism and scandal generally, keeping the issue as quiet and nonvisible as possible. John explained:

There were lots of fights and lots of truancy. And really, whether you mix kids of different socioeconomic backgrounds and what chips on the shoulders people may have brought to school manifest themselves in a lot of bad behavior and a lot of fights at school. And that was sort of a lightening rod, if you will, for the chamber's Public Education Committee and me to get involved with it.

Here, John reduced the very public and recent maelstrom of controversy surrounding the merger to a "chip on the shoulder" of poor and\* minority students.

After consulting with school administrators, chamber members settled on an alternative high and middle school as the best possible solution, and they led the fund-raising drive. John continued:

We were seeing a lot of classes get disrupted by disruptive kids. And the point was that it was not fair to any of the kids who wanted to go into class and learn. And so our question was, what was the school system doing about this? And what we found out was: not much. So, we at the chamber said, "There needs to be alternative classroom settings for these kids who disrupt so these kids who want to learn can learn. And the disruptive kids need to be in this setting until they are ready to play by the rules." So that is how we got involved with it. . . . The chamber was one of the catalysts to say, "Disruptive kids need to be out of the classroom."

Here, John invoked the ubiquitous sports metaphor to present schools as meritocratic, where success is equally available to all children and fitting into school structures is a mere matter of "playing by the rules." Such metaphors ignore the complicated social history that, as Fordham (1996) and other educational anthropologists have shown, has created race and class stereotypes such as "the good student" and "the disruptive student" or "the problem child." Present-day students produce social identities within the constraints of these histories and forces. Talk of "fair play" allows people to mistake privilege for a greater willingness to work hard, and "disruption" for an individual's free choice within a meritocratic institution.

Durham chamber members threw their considerable influence and financial resources behind the institution of an alternative school. State grants and the popularity of alternative programs among professional educators also aided efforts. The resulting school suffered from a serious lack of resources, including such basics as textbooks and pupil desks. Locked doors, windowless rooms, a strictly controlled entrance and exit, and a dilapidated physical plant gave the institution a decidedly penal feeling. The alternative school, along with a program for violent youth, was "dumped" with no consultation, as community activists claimed, in a poor, black neighborhood plagued by crime and violence. Angering residents even further, the school usurped part of the building that the "community development" volunteer coalition was using for community programs. The alternative site overwhelmingly schooled poor, black, male youth. Thus, the personal, parental interests of middle-class,



predominantly white chamber members were translated into new policy and institutions affecting black youth with minimal public involvement.

Several years later, school conditions prompted a local judge to summon education policy makers and demand a reexamination of the abysmal institution. To defuse the controversy, the local school system established a "task force" to develop recommendations. Once again, chamber members, developers, real estate agents, and public relations handlers of big local businesses were prominent voices. Representatives of African American political groups charged that the majority white school board, white superintendent, and the white-controlled public schools were condemning black youth to quasi-incarceration; tellingly, the groups failed to ascertain the backstage influence of the chamber in instituting the school. As for chamber members themselves, they considered the accusation of racism within a limited, interpersonal (rather than structural) frame. For one task force member, the fact that a high school with a new building, a black principal, and a majority of black teachers referred six students to the alternative school during the year proved that race and class were not at issue (as though a black person could not be racist or classist, and a onetime capital investment should immediately redress years of discrimination). Another white chamber member, after visiting some of the schools and speaking with principals, said:

I was convinced they were looking at this color blind. They were just sending the worst kids over. And the worst kids happened to be African American, for the most part. . . . [The teachers and principals] were not looking at the kids in terms of white or black, they were looking at them as disruptive students. And they would get so many slots at [the alternative school], and they would send their worst kids until their slots ran out.

He refused to consider the role of racism and classism in defining school behaviors and school identities and steadfastly ignored the impact of larger structural inequalities on an interpretation of "disruptive" or "worst" kids.

The evolution of the task force, and the way that some issues were quietly defined out of the realm of possibility while others were accepted and advanced, was telling. Among chamber participants, opinions diverged in predictable ways. One group supported a punishment approach, criticized the use of social services or supplementary learning, such as field trips, as expensive and inappropriate for undeserving students, censured the overall expense of the program, and called for character education. The following extensive quote from one white, middle-class member reflects the concerns he represented on the task force:

I wanted no out-of-school suspensions at all. We don't need these kids on the street doing stuff, whatever that stuff is. I felt that they either stay in the school, or they get into the juvenile system, court system, or social services system, but controlled, not out in the streets. . . . [And they should] respect the

rights of others. If [teachers] would just teach respect, you know, like if I'm driving a car, and somebody's coming out of the driveway, well, you know, pull on out, don't walk in front of my car when the light's red against you, and just walk, you know. They don't budge, some of these kids. And they just needed to be taught ethics and something that's called dilemmas. You know, give them dilemmas and what would you do. They don't teach any of that stuff in school. Dispute settlement, I added that [to my recommendations], and what they call conflict resolution. . . . And any of the hands-on activities, projects, field trips, or athletics, whatever, it must be earned. Good students in the home school get all these benefits because they're good students. But don't send them over to an [alternative] school, give them all this stuff, and they haven't earned it. . . . And there are a lot of things here, like parent involvement, outreach services, guidance counselor, and mental health, nutrition, medical, dental, that's DSS, Durham Social Services, I guess. . . . [schools] just become a subset of Social Services Department. We don't need, we got enough with the one we got. . . . The cost per student, and nationally, in Durham County the cost per student was a little over \$5,000 across 29,000 kids, when you look at their total budget. . . . [At the alternative school, with five experienced and nine inexperienced teachers, they spend] \$15,000 a kid and they weren't doing nothing for them. Fifteen thousand [dollars] a kid, it's three times the expense, and they can do it at the same cost if they stayed in their old schools, didn't have to buy them some old building that don't work.

Following the cost-effectiveness line of the argument, this representative recommended that the alternative school cease to exist, and that schools maintain smaller alternative units in the home schools. However, he also recommended a tenfold expansion of the number of students controlled in an alternative setting.

A second strand of business discourse more closely mirrored the standard liberal "isolation and rehabilitation" line of thought. These proponents hoped to segregate "disruptive" students and turn them into "productive citizens," and they did not begrudge the money required to do so.

As one white, middle-class participant stated:

You need so many extra resources that teach these kids to be responsible students that the cost per student is high, much higher than it is for a regular student. And that is troublesome to a lot of people in and of itself. It's: "We are spending \$4,000 per year on my kid, why are we spending \$8,000 per year on this disruptive kid?" You know, people had some problems with that. Unfortunately for us, we needed this alternative school or else you'd be disrupting classrooms with some of these students. And you had to pay to fix that. And it was not an expensive fix.

His cost-benefit analysis resembled the standard reformist argument that investing in a child's education avoids the expense of jailing him or her\* later; given the quasi-penal nature of alternative schools, the similarity runs deep.

Black interests centered on different issues: the mechanism for student referrals, the criteria for a student's return to his or her\* home school, the staffing of the alternative school, feelings of distrust with the school hierarchy, and questions of culturally appropriate teaching and curriculum. Though they resembled neoconservative discourse, black concerns over character education echoed a cultural idealism of self-reliance and respect.

Upon its conclusion, the task force returned middle school students to their home school, reduced the number of high-school students, and moved the better-funded alternative school to the downtown Durham area of developers' affluent, ambitious redevelopment schemes. Although the physical structure improved considerably, and referral procedures were amended, school-district managers of the task force quashed charges of structural racism, critiques of school culture, and proposed revisions of the alternative school's purpose. Members of the task force we interviewed indicated they had not visited the new school and could not comment on its success or failure. This further demonstrates that the greatest part of the "disruptive student" problem was its visibility and threatened derailment of Durham's image spinning in national business circles.

### **Conclusion**

The rhetoric of schools in the service of economic expansion was promoted and made accessible by the intensive, yet veiled, political machinations of a privileged group at the national level. In Durham and Halifax, as, indeed, in places across North Carolina and the United States, local growth elite adopted this discourse and used it to justify pernicious educational structures, such as unequally funded districts in Halifax and an abysmal alternative school in Durham. The segregation of poor, black students into underresourced, low-performing separate schools reserved the best of the public schools for the children of the growth elite. At the same time, it allowed those real estate agents, bankers, developers, and landholders to offer orderly, higher-performing public schools with greater cultural and, at times, economic capital as an amenity to mobile capital and middle-class families, whose relocation financially benefited the growth elite.

The discourse of schools in the service to the economy marketizes education by subordinating other goals, such as social equity, to an economic one. Yet this is only one means of marketization. Others—charter schools, vouchers, standardized testing, and privatization of services and administration—continue to expand and fundamentally reshape the public educational system in the United States. The data from this and other studies suggest that the marketization of education harms working-class and\* minority populations. To combat these effects, we must denaturalize the economic discourse of schooling and restore alternative visions of the possibilities and purpose of public education.

Ethnographic studies of policy formation contribute to efforts to de-naturalize economic discourses of schooling. First, ethnography historically contextualizes contemporary debates, tracking the emergence of (now orthodox) discourses, revealing the political and economic changes that made such discourses possible (and, for some, desirable), and implicitly comparing the current moment to a time when people imagined other purposes for education. Second, ethnography situates the actors who take up discourses, examining the micropolitics of actors' identities and actions. These analytic moves historically, politically, and socially position discourses, thus challenging their aura of "common sense."

Finally, this study reminds us, as educational anthropologists, of the value of studying the cultural politics of policy formation. We need to look beyond the classroom, the school, the organizational structure, the curriculum, and even policy-making arenas, such as school boards or state legislatures, to examine the broader cultural context of school reform. We also ask, who is privileged to speak about educational issues, and how are they granted this privilege? What people or groups are excluded from those decisions, and how? Where are decisions really made? What is public opinion, and how are cultural politics engaged in shaping it? These and other questions should critically inform our research.

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## Notes

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1. The Edison Project, Educational Alternatives, Inc., and Public Strategies, Inc. are the most active of these for-profit educational organizations.

2. Other key texts for this period are *Workforce 2000* (Johnston and Packer 1987) and two response pieces: *The Myth of the Coming Labor Shortage* (Mishel et al. 1991) and *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!* (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce 1990). In his series of reports "On the Condi-

tion of Public Education" in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Gerald Bracey has debunked the supposed slip in standardized test scores (Bracey 1995).

3. See Luebke (1990), where he distinguishes between "modernizer" and "traditionalist" fragments within the old Southern Democratic party. Modernizers characteristically urged education as a respectable route to social mobility (shielding themselves from more radical considerations of economic redistribution).

4. In 1998, 13 of North Carolina's 34 charter schools had student bodies composed of more than 85 percent African American students, disproportionate to the population of the surrounding school districts. In other cases (such as Chatham County), exclusive white private schools assumed charter status, recruiting a few minority students to fulfill the minimalist diversity recommendation.

5. The suggestive phrase "growth elite" was adopted by Ray and Mickelson from Logan and Molotch (1987).\*

6. For an account of how cities manage education conflict in order to protect their image in national business circles, see Ray and Mickelson (1990; 1993) and Mickelson and Ray (1994). In Charlotte, NC, the chamber-led "growth elite," in the interests of preserving an image of racial tolerance, blocked attempts by relocated industrial leaders to remove "disruptive" students to a centralized vocational school. Instead, the task force settled on early childhood education and the socialization of poor children of color as a compromise project. However, the continued and insistent animosity of relocated middle-class families to integrated schools eventually caused the chamber to quietly withdraw support for mandatory desegregation through busing.

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