ENCOUNTERING REFORM:
RACE, POWER, AND THE UNMAKING OF DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation traces the role of race and class politics in shaping educational governance in Detroit and the relationship between discourse and Black urban citizenship in the 21st century. Covering the period from 1990-2006, *Encountering Reform* argues that corporate and political elites discursively constructed Detroit Public Schools (DPS) as a "failed" district during the 1990s in order to justify and enable a series of market-based educational "reforms," culminating in a state takeover of the district in 1999. Using documents from public and private institutions, speeches, newspaper articles, books, archival data from Wayne State University, and in-depth interviews, as well as the methods of institutional ethnography and content analysis, this dissertation illustrates how state takeovers represent a key mechanism racial capitalists use to maintain and legitimate their ongoing dispossession of poor and working-class African American communities. Black Detroiters resisted this linguistic and political takeover and rejected the narrative of DPS "failure." In the first two chapters, I argue that the discourse of education "reform" was developed and mobilized by Governor John Engler, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, and other white and Black elites to construct DPS as a "failed" district during the 1990s to extract wealth from low-income, Black communities and create a charter school market based on the recruitment of Black minds and the public dollars attached to them. However, in chapter three I demonstrate the various ways local residents in Detroit resisted the takeover and show how they constructed an alternative vision of "reform," one predicated on a vision of DPS "success" and Black political autonomy.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the young Black people I met
in the My Brother's Keeper Mentoring Program and their families.
Thank you for teaching me and caring for me.

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

ACE	African Centered Education
BPQE	Black Parents for Quality Education
CRC	Citizens Research Council
DEC	Detroit Economic Club
DPS	Detroit Public Schools
KTV/NT	Keep the Vote/No Takeover
MCPP	Mackinac Center for Public Policy
MDOE	Michigan Department of Education
MEAP	Michigan Education Assessment Program
MPNE	Michigan Partnership for New Education
MPPPC	Michigan Public-Private Partnership Commission
OIG	Office of Inspector General
OREAA	Office of Research, Evaluation, Assessment and Accountability
PDS	Professional Development Schools
PMT	Program Management Team
PRMXA	Paul Robeson Malcolm X Academy
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
WSU	Wayne State University

INTRODUCTION

THE "PROBLEM" OF BLACK EDUCATION IN DETROIT

We've all seen the headlines decrying the state of American public education. If not in Detroit, then Chicago, Washington D.C., or elsewhere. One article published by a leading school reformer in *The Atlantic* is a prime example. Titled "The Failure of American Schools," the author argues that, "nearly three decades after *A Nation at Risk*, the groundbreaking report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, warned of a 'rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people,' the gains we have made in improving our schools are negligible" (Klein 2011). The article's author, Joel Klein, had just completed an eight-year stint as the Chancellor for New York City's (NYC) Department of Education – the largest urban school system in the nation – and was serving as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Amplify, a private educational services company, when the article was written.

Citing data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, high school graduation rates, and ACT scores, Klein wrote that the educational performance of students in the US had stalled for decades, while that of students in other countries surged ahead. The "failure" of American education was most acutely visible, he wrote, among "low-income, black students" in cities like Detroit and Los Angeles. "Public education lacks…accountability," stated the former school chancellor. "It is essentially a government-run monopoly. Whether a school does well or poorly, it will get the students it needs to stay in business, because most kids have no other choice. And that, in turn, creates no incentive for better performance, greater efficiency, or more innovation – all things necessary in public education as they are in any other field" (Klein 2011).

There was only one solution to the problem of this "government-run monopoly" in urban America, Klein told *The Atlantic's* liberal readership. The nation must engage in "radical reform" by dramatically overhauling the nation's public school system. The former Chancellor of NYC's Dept. of Education clarified even further what that restructuring should look like, advocating for a "full-scale transition from a government-run monopoly to a competitive marketplace" (Klein 2011). Klein, in other words, was advocating for the neoliberalization of urban education.

This dissertation is guided by at least a five questions. First, how did white elites construct Detroit's low-income Black students as a problem? Second, how did elites use discourse to manufacture Detroit as a failed district in need of reform? Third, what were the consequences of the state's takeover policies and practices on residents and key stakeholders in Detroit Public Schools? Fourth, how did residents and key stakeholders in the Detroit's public-school system respond to the policies, practices, and narratives fueling the long, protracted discursive process of educational restructuring? And finally, how did public-school parents, teachers, school administrators, and students involved in the African-Centered School movement in Detroit negotiate, resist, acquiesce, and support the State's 1999 takeover of the district?

In asking the question of how it became possible for the state of Michigan to take over Detroit Public Schools (DPS) and abolish the district's democratically elected school board, I intend to reveal the crucial role that language plays in the construction of reality and, as a consequence, racial capitalism. My approach to Black politics, capitalism, and urban studies, as well as the research questions that guide this study, parallel that of critical international relations theorists and radical geographers who use institutional ethnography and discourse analysis to powerfully illustrate the ways Western nations have, and continue, to linguistically construct the

"Third World" to maintain imperialistic relations of domination (Escobar 2011; Roy 2016; Doty 1996; Bayat 2009; Hunt 2009; Ferguson 1994; Mudimbe 1988; Said 1979; ; Roy et al. 2016). These relations of unequal power have persisted in the postcolonial era, and are maintained by representational practices dominated by the Global "North" that continue to justify their myriad interventions in the Global "South." These practices have been essential for enabling the ongoing extraction of wealth and resources from their former colonies through the mobilization of discourses like "good governance," "humanitarian intervention," or "failed states," with detrimental consequences for inhabitants of those former colonies (Edozie 2008; Abrahamsen 2001; Mamdani 2010).

This dissertation tells the tale of an educational scheme in Michigan that quickly devolved into a post-racial nightmare for Detroit residents. Instead of the educational liberation promised by politicians, academics, philanthropists, other nonprofit organizations, the discourse of school "reform" in Detroit produced the exact opposite: the abolition of local democracy and the reshaping of Black citizenship, expanding racial oppression and Black dispossession. The takeover of Detroit Public Schools (DPS), as well as the districts dramatic enrollment declines, its fiscal crises, deteriorating buildings, and struggles to provide a quality education are just some of the consequences or *effects* of the failures of "reform" since the 1980s (Mirel 1999; Bosman 2017). However, this dissertation examines the effects of these failures in even greater detail.

In that sense, this dissertation can be seen as a history of the failure of school "reform" in Detroit, a discourse and practice that many genuinely believed in. Still, the primary objectives of this dissertation, above all else, are two-fold. The first objective is to demonstrate how DPS was discursively constructed as a "failed" district since 1990 by elites, which in turn justified and enabled "reform" projects like "choice" and, in particular, the state takeover of DPS, both of

which enriched white elites. The second objective of this dissertation is to illustrate the effects of the discourse of education “reform” and takeover from the perspective of key stakeholders in DPS. Indeed, this second objective is vital given, as Lipman notes, “there is little critical examination of the genesis of these policies; whose interests they serve; their social implications, or their meanings for teachers, communities, and most of all,” the low-income Black children they target (Lipman 2003, 3).

Therefore, this dissertation makes four major contributions to the disciplines of Political Science, Black Studies, and Urban Studies. First, as a case study of how power functions in the US, it reveals how state and private institutions have worked together in Detroit to restructure the meaning and practice of Black citizenship. Second, it challenges political scientists -and social scientists more generally - to not only pay attention to institutions, but even more importantly, the relations those institutions have with corporations, political leaders, and other ruling elites. Third, my dissertation suggests understanding Black politics and urban politics in the US more broadly requires acknowledging and accounting for both the internal and external nature of those struggles, which take place under significant conditions of structural inequality. Finally, and maybe the most important contribution this project makes to these fields is explicitly demonstrating how power, specifically the process of racialization, functions through discourse. This is particularly significant as language is the primary means through which we engage the world, and how public policy is conceptualized and implemented. In the post-Jim Crow era, in other words, discourse has played a constitutive role in maintaining what political scientists Desmond S. King and Rogers Smith calls the “American racial order” (King and Smith 2005, 78).

RACE, CAPITALISM, AND EDUCATION "REFORM" IN THE 21ST CENTURY BLACK METROPOLIS

"For students of color in America's schools, there is only one acceptable goal: achieving Whiteness" (Kirkland 2010).

Klein's urgent call for the radical restructuring of "government-run monopoly" schools above is part of a broader education "reform" discourse that emerged in the national consciousness during the early 1980s. The discourse grew out of concerns about America's public schools first expressed in a report published by the US Department of Education in 1983. That publication, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, was the first time the federal government had publicly linked the fate of national economic prosperity to educational performance. It begins by telling Americans: "Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility." That problem, the report states, is that the "educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (The National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). And while Klein's article echoes the concerns articulated in *A Nation at Risk,* upon closer inspection the former Chancellor's concerns are more spatially concentrated, focused on urban districts in particular.

The issue of public school failure for Klein appears to be not so much a white, middle-class problem, but as a low-income, urban, *Black* problem. "Many middle-class families," observes Klein, "have plenty of choice (even beyond private schools): they can move to another neighborhood, or are well-connected enough to navigate the system." The real issue is that "those families who are least powerful…usually get one choice: their neighborhood school. That," writes Klein, "has to change," concluding "without a citizenry willing to insist on those

reforms, our schools will continue to decline. And just as it was with Detroit, the global marketplace will be very unforgiving to a populace that doesn't have the skills it demands" (Klein 2011). The title of Klein's article could very well have been called, "The Failure of American *Urban* Education," or given his multiple references to Detroit in the piece, "The Failure of Detroit Public Schools."

This dissertation is interested in the seemingly large role that urban education has occupied in the minds of the American public, and Michigan's "reformers" in particular. Even more fascinating to me was the dominant expectation among many leaders in the US that African American children (and Indigenous and Latinx children for that matter) in the nation's urban centers should be "performing" or "achieving," educationally, in the exact same way that white, middle-class children do. This expectation must indeed be perplexing to anyone with even an elementary understanding of Black history, or, maybe a more advanced understanding of "American" history.

That African American children are expected to achieve the same scores on standardized testing as their white counterparts or risk being labelled "failures" with all attendant consequences, despite dramatic social, economic, and political inequality in the US – outcomes that were specifically and intentionally structured by the very architects of America's political economy – was baffling. Moreover, comparing test scores between districts or Black districts to the state average – an average heavily determined by the performance of white students given their disproportionate share of total public school enrollment in the state – I began to speculate like the Director of New York University's Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and Transformation of Schools who is quoted in the opening epigraph of this section, that African

American children in the US were expected by elites and increasingly everyday people to *become* white.

Critiquing the mainstream use of academic achievement data today, David E. Kirkland examined the origins of the "achievement gap," concluding that, while it "began as a way to name the nation's failure to educate all youth equally, it soon devolved into a mechanism for normalizing Whiteness and further obscuring past and current histories of racial oppression" (Kirkland 2010). Thus, the achievement gap became a political tool that normalized white supremacy by constantly comparing nonwhites, or "the other,"[1] to whites, effectively making whiteness *the* standard. When nonwhite children came up short, they were labelled as "failed" or "underperforming" students. With the increased use of data – test scores, dropout rates, graduation rates, attendance, expulsions, etc. – being mobilized to justify the restructuring of public school governance, especially in school districts and neighborhoods that are predominantly Black, testing and other modes of analysis have emerged as new "blunt force" instruments in the contemporary transformation of racial capitalism and Black urban space (Kirkland 2010).

Test after test, as Klein suggested, continuously affirms Black "failure," despite "reform" after "reform." Once again, the Negro "problem" perplexes the nation's political and corporate elites, although today, the "problem" walks around the dilapidated hallways of America's urban schools, mired in a culture and community of "failure" and crime, and trapped in a system of "government-run" schools managed by "ineffective" and "inefficient," if not corrupt, bureaucrats. To better make sense of this discursive and political conundrum, I believe it is first necessary to begin with a clear understanding of the nature and structure of social relations in the

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[1] For an excellent account of how the normalization of whiteness and the construction of "the other" proceeded across the world, see Roxanne Doty (1996) or Michael Hunt (2009).

US. Thus, the following section offers some theoretical and historical insights offered by the framework of racial capitalism.

RACIAL CAPITALISM IN THE UNITED STATES: AN INSTITUTIONALIZED SOCIAL ORDER

Over the last twenty years, the framework of racial capitalism has gained increasing popularity among social science and humanities scholars. This interest was ignited by the 2000 reprint of *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition,* by Cedric Robinson, especially its accompanying forward written by Robin D.G. Kelley (Burden-Stelly 2020, 8). More recently, Black political scientists Michael C. Dawson and Megan Ming Francis launched the Race and Capitalism Project in 2015 to support and expand research that illuminates "how processes of racialization within the U.S. shaped capitalist society and economy and how capitalism has simultaneously shaped processes of racialization" (Race & Capitalism Project n.d.). In 2017, the *Boston Review* held a forum titled "To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice," which featured commentaries and analysis by scholars of various disciplinary backgrounds on the work of Harvard historian Walter Johnson, whose research of slavery in the US is directly informed by Robinson's theorization of racial capitalism. And as recently as 2020, the *Monthly Review* published a special issue of their journal that focused on racial capitalism, providing some useful insights into the concept's evolving meanings and uses.

One contributor to that special issue, Charisse Burden-Stelly, provides a useful summation of racial capitalism, describing its utility as a conceptual framework to examine hierarchical social orders structured by the "mutually constitutive nature of racialization and capitalist exploitation, *inter alia,* on a global scale, in specific localities, in discrete historical moments, in the entrenchment of the carceral state, and in the era of neoliberalization and permanent war" (Burden-Stelly 2020, 1). Not only is this framework gaining increasing

academic traction, but as historian Robin D.G. Kelley points out, contemporary "insurgent black movements against state violence and mass incarceration call for an end to 'racial capitalism' and see their work as part of a 'black radical tradition'" (2017).

Indeed, in her analysis of the Black Lives Matter Movement/Movement for Black Lives (BLMM/M4BL), Black Feminist and historian Barbara Ransby determined that the majority of movement members developed a political analysis that "builds on Cedric Robinson's assessment of racial capitalism as one of the foundations of Black social and economic oppression," as evidenced by their Vision for Black Lives Statement (2018, 29). Therefore, on the one hand, racial capitalism has been conceptualized as a political-economic target of Black and other progressive social movements concerned with achieving racial justice and abolishing economic oppression. On the other, it has emerged as a critical conceptual framework among a burgeoning number of scholars and activists concerned with explaining the creation, maintenance, and reproduction of racial inequality in the US and abroad. In this way, the rise of racial capitalism, as a mode of critical political economic analysis, has become part of a cutting-edge theoretical movement within and beyond Black Studies.

For this study, I follow Dawson and Francis in defining racial capitalism as a framework that conceptualizes the US as an institutionalized social order[2], "produced by the mutually constitutive hierarchical structures of capitalism and race…It is not just that capitalism shapes how race is understood and produced within the United States but…that white supremacy shaped the contours of capitalism" (Dawson and Francis 2016). This framework differs from both the more limited, although mainstream views of capitalism as simply an economic or 'free market' system, and those more critical conceptualizations of capitalism that reduce its essential

[2] I have drawn this phrase from Nancy Fraser's description of capitalism, whose work I engage later in this chapter.

character to a system of exploitation of workers by capitalists – those individuals who own the means of production.

Unlike these more familiar theorizations of capitalism, the framework of racial capitalism centers our attention on the dynamic, historical interrelationship between racialization and capitalist domination, clarifying how mainstream political, social, and economic institutions have systematically interacted to maintain and reproduce social relations in the United States in ways that privilege wealthy, white Americans, while exploiting, excluding, marginalizing, as a group, non-white populations from the full benefits and privileges associated with modern citizenship in a liberal democracy. As a result, my use of racial capitalism does not deny the insights of those Marxist-inspired scholars who accurately identify class oppression as a key dimension of our society, arguing that recent public school "reforms" amounts to "the transfer of assets from the public and popular realms to the private and class-privileged domains" (Harvey 2007, 161). Instead, it builds on these ideas while recognizing that race is the primary, "*the* key, constitutive line of stratification within the United States" (Dawson 2003, 25). In doing so, I illustrate how the "transfer of assets" occurs within a definite institutional social order organized by both race and class oppression.

Conceptualizing capitalism as solely an economic system based on market exchange and private property overlooks what Nancy Fraser has called capitalism's "background conditions of possibility," conditions that operate largely independently of market relations. These are the conditions that make a free market economy, or market exchange and private property, possible in practice. "Markets depend for their very existence on non-marketized social relations, which supply their background conditions of possibility" (Fraser 2014, 59). Drawing on Marx's theory of primitive accumulation, or what David Harvey has more recently theorized as "accumulation

by dispossession" (Harvey 2007, 160) Fraser looks beneath the visible tapestry of 'market' relations, peering even further behind the realm of capitalist exploitation Marx is famous for highlighting, to illuminate the "hidden abode" of expropriation. Here, she argues, capitalism operates through "*confiscating* capacities and resources and *conscripting* them into capital's circuits of self-expansion" (2016, 166). Therefore, expropriation, or dispossession as Marx and Harvey refer to it as, serves as an enabling and indispensable background condition of capitalism. It's a process necessary for capitalism to function. It was through expropriation of land that capitalism's core features – private ownership of the means of production and the "freeing" of labor were achieved. Similar to Harvey (2007, 160–65), Fraser views expropriation as an ongoing, violent, and often blatant, practice of dispossession that is indispensable to the processes of market creation, market operation, and capital accumulation.

Black political scientist Michael Dawson agrees with Fraser that capitalism is more than simply an economic system, embracing her definition of capitalism as an institutionalized social order – one which combines both market and non-market social relations and institutions. However, Dawson laments that Fraser did not explicate her analysis of expropriation further. Thus, responding to Fraser, he writes that understanding how capitalism was founded and continues to operate "requires a consideration of 'the hidden abode of race': the ontological distinction between superior and inferior humans—codified as race—that was necessary for slavery, colonialism, the theft of lands in the Americas, and genocide" (Dawson 2016, 1470). The processes by which Europeans codified the distinctions between superior and inferior humans is referred to by social scientists as racialization. Honing in on this relationship between racialization and capitalist development has long been a central concern of Black intellectuals,

particularly the connection between racial oppression and capital accumulation (DuBois 1998; C. J. Robinson 2000; Cox 1964; E. Williams 1994; Kelley 1990; 2003). This dissertation explores the complex interconnections between racialization and capitalist accumulation in Detroit as manifest in the contemporary discourse of education "reform."

URBAN NEOLIBERALISM AND THE DISCOURSE OF EDUCATION "REFORM"

The use of the concept of neoliberalism in social science has exploded in recent decades and the phrase has been used to characterize a broad spectrum of issues and phenomena. "States, provinces, policies, eras, people, countries, and institutions have all been deemed 'neoliberal' or 'neoliberalizing,'" writes geographer Jason Hackworth, and has come "to mean anything related to business; to mean anything related to capitalism; to mean anything related to liberals in the United States." In other words, he concludes, "neoliberalism is everywhere and, apparently, everything" (Hackworth 2006, xi–xii). While neoliberalism, and its various meanings have become ubiquitous, I use the term to refer to "an ideology that advocates the economy and society be freed from the state regulations, and be controlled, instead, by individuals and corporate bodies in accordance with their self interests, mediated through the invisible hands of the market" (Bayat 2012, 110).

The early 1980s not only witnessed an infusion of neoliberal ideology in public policy through political leaders like US President Ronald Reagan, but relatedly a new discovery of educational "failure." Educational historians have found that, until the late 1970s, Americans generally liked their public schools. Even during that decade, Diane Ravitch writes, the "public was apathetic about the topic. Education was not an important public issue. It received little attention from the media, and the debates among educators were unknown to the general public" (Ravitch 1990). However, that all quickly changed with the publication of *A Nation At Risk*,

which grabbed national headlines overnight, sparking public concern with school "failure" that persists to this day.

The report warned Americans that "the educational foundations of our society are…being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity" threatening the nation's "once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation" (1983). The report cited declining SAT and ACT scores, high illiteracy rates, low achievement on standardized tests, and poor math and science skills as indicators of this educational mediocrity and decline. Asserting a deep connection between public education and national prosperity, the report urgently called for a fundamental restructuring of the nation's public school system. Additionally, the very title of the report was intentionally worded to seize public attention and convey an urgent, even if exaggerated, need for "reform."

Interviews with members of this Commission reveal the discursive decisions that informed the report and why they were pursued. Yvonne Larsen, President of one of the largest school districts in the nation at the time, the San Diego Unified School District, described the reason for naming the report "A Nation at Risk." "They wanted, *A Nation at Risk*, and we all agreed that was appropriate...They all (the Commission) signed on, we wanted to get America's attention and we thought you couldn't do it with saccharin and sugar, but we could do it if we really, really told the story as it should be told and as it were realistic at that time. So therefore yes, we thought we needed stronger language" (Good 2010, 378). President of Xavier University, Norman C. Francis, another member of The Commission, also spoke about the need to use strong language to capture public attention, and in particular, media headlines. "[W]e wanted the reporters who were part of the American system of writing and reading to be able to

read it and write about it in plain English…Of course, we used the kinds of language for it that did good sound bites for both the written and video (coverage) (Good 2010, 379).

The Report describes a "rising tide of mediocrity" as threatening US prosperity and putting "at risk" the nation's status as a global hegemon (The National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983, 1). It declares US educational institutions responsible for declining student achievement and calls for "reform of our educational system in fundamental ways." In fact, according to The Commission, the state of public education in the US was so bad it was as if a foreign power had declared war on the nation. Still, Jay Sommer, member of The Commission and winner of the 1981-82 National Teacher of the Year Award, provides further insight into the conscious representational practices deployed in the Report. Things had to be said "in an alarming kind of way," said Sommers, "even to the point where the statistics may not have been quite correct, but the most important point really is that we were talking basically in terms of horrible schools" (Good 2010, 378). That language was being used to tell a story, drawing upon statistics "that may not have been quite correct," suggests as other members of The Commission stated, that many intentional discursive decisions were made in constructing the document in order to present reality "as it should be."

While the "body of the *Nation* document spoke to an education system that was failing the youth of America," the actual word failure was nowhere to be found in the document (GOOD 2010, 376). Nevertheless, the Report marks the birth of the education reform discourse and the problematization of school "failure". The first comprehensive federal document calling for education reform, its use of international and national test scores, high school dropout rates, and ACT scores, served as a broad framework for future analyses of school success and failure.

Sommers described a more circumscribed geography of school reform, suggesting that it was not American public education generally that was their primary concern, but rather urban education. He asserted:

> [W]e were talking about inner-city schools, and we totally sort of, *we left out the successes and that was deliberate*. I mean there is no comparison between an inner city school anyplace, in Chicago and let's say New Rochelle High School where I taught. So things were sort of obscured and covered up, but there were many schools that produced wonderful students and students who went on to colleges and careers. That too was an element of *emphasizing things in such a way an element (of failure) would be created*...mainly, America was not falling apart educationally, there was a segment of American student that was and that is almost a natural consequence of things (Good 2010, 375; emphasis added).

This observation reveals that, at the birth of education reform movement in the US, at least some of its progenitors conceived of this project as a distinctly urban project, one that was "more isolated" and focused on the nation's inner cities (Good 2010, 375). This discursive construction of school "failure" initiated by The Commission, and its specifically urban concern, as was shown above, has not been confined to the 1980s.

Shortly after the publication of The Commission's report, a picture of the uneven geography of public educational performance across the American landscape began to crystalize: while important progress was being made with many schools assuming more challenging curriculums and course requirements, others were seen as lagging. Henig et. al. suggest that the schools that "fall short are disproportionately concentrated in large urban areas with racially and ethnically more heterogenous populations." They "perform much more poorly than others on standardized tests…and within those urban districts minority children and children in high-poverty schools perform more poorly still" (1999, 13). Increasingly test scores, dropout and graduation rates, and crime became seen as markers of school failure, defining the image of urban education in American society.

Concerned that the nation's public education system was undermining US economic competitiveness, corporate business leaders seized The Commission's findings, and vigorously sponsored reports, speeches, and conferences exploring this new educational crisis, and emphasized the consequences of poor schools on the development of human capital and the broader national economy. By 1990, the corporate world and the nation's political leadership were blaming "the institutions of direct democratic control" – those "government-run monopolies" criticized by Klein – as the reason public schools "fail" (Chubb and Moe 1990, 2). According to this neoliberal view that would come to dominate ideas about education "reform," school "failure" was primarily the consequence of an *institutional* failure: democracy.

"Special interests" controlled democratically elected school boards, creating a "bureaucracy" that failed to serve the needs of students these neoliberal school reformer asserted. Local school boards and superintendents, as well as teacher unions, civil rights groups, parent advocacy organizations, etc., particularly in large urban school districts, were seen as generating an ineffective, inefficient "system," driven by patronage, re-election, and self-interest instead of the academic needs and demands of the nation's most impoverished and overlooked communities. To solve the urban educational "crisis," business and political leaders began to push for market-based school reforms, subjecting public-schools to "competition" and promoting increasingly rigorous educational standards, which, if unmet, could result in loss of school funding or closure. These developments also reflected a new push for "accountability."

Recently, several researchers have begun to theorize neoliberalism as not only a class-based project designed to redistribute wealth upwards to a privileged elite, but as a racial project as well, intended to preserve or expand white economic power and remake urban space according to the visions of white businesses, citizens, and foundations (Buras 2014; Pedroni

2011; Klein 2008; Lipsitz 2007). Observing a significant racial transformation of post-Katrina educational governance in the predominately Black New Orleans Parish school district, Dixon, Buras, and Jeffers conclude that neoliberal reforms enabled "White entrepreneurs to raid the public school treasury and create new markets at the expense of poor and working-class students of color in urban schools" (Dixson, Buras, and Jeffers 2015, 290). In Chicago, Pauline Lipman similarly concluded that neoliberal educational restructuring "amounts to the appropriation of black urban space for capital accumulation with charter expansion a vast new sector" (Lipman 2015, 60). Privatizing public schools because of academic "failure" or in the name austerity spawned a market for educational entrepreneurs and charter companies where one previously didn't exist. As I will show in this dissertation, the creation of an educational "market" has been achieved through the construction of Black people as "failed," which in turn justified a direct assault on Black political and economic autonomy.

Nevertheless, many Black and Latinx communities have been raising awareness about the impact of these neoliberal school "reforms" on their communities as well as resisting its effects. Journey for Justice, an alliance of grassroots organizations seeking community-based alternatives to the privatization of public schools, produced a report that found Black urban school districts across the nation have closed hundreds of schools in the past decade, while Black enrollment in charter schools skyrockets, and public school attendance continues to plummet amidst aggressive charter school recruitment (National Alliance 2014). Across the nation, Black cities and neighborhoods are increasingly challenging and brining awareness to the non-transparent ways these policies are enacted (Buras 2011). Still, state takeovers have gained popularity over the past several decades as a policy tool of neoliberal school "reform" (Morel 2018).

The Race to Takeovers

State takeovers of public-school districts began roughly 30 years ago, with New Jersey assuming control over Jersey City Public Schools in 1989 (Morel 2018, 1). Since that time, more than a hundred school districts have been taken over by state legislatures or governors, often leading to the removal of elected officials and the transferring of fiscal and academic control of school systems to corporate-friendly mayors, state appointees, or reform boards (Morel 2018, 2). It has been reported that 75% of all students in state governed schools in the US have been Black or Latino, making state takeovers of local school districts a distinctly racial issue (Burns 2010). The rise of state takeovers, as well as its distinctly racial character has even been a point of discussion in broader US popular culture.

Lee and Croninger write about the significance of the popular 1989 film, *Lean on Me*, based on Joe Louis Clark, a principal in Patterson, New Jersey who worked tirelessly to improve student test scores to help avert a looming state takeover of his school. Playing Mr. Clark, actor Morgan Freeman portrays a tough, no non-sense principal who is committed to ridding his school of drugs, crime, and bad teachers. At the same time, Mr. Clark exhibits a deep love and compassion for his students, holding high expectations of students and staff alike. Directed by John G. Avildsen, the movie which presents Mr. Clark's almost single-handed success in raising student test scores, reflects an important trend in urban education, according to Lee and Croninger, where teachers are seen as *the* decisive factor inhibiting student education and performance (1996, 365). Structural problems of race, wealth, geography and inequality were increasingly dismissed or simply not acknowledged as barriers to student success. The issue, this logic went, was that teachers are the decisive factor "reform." The same analysis applies to the 1988 film *Stand and Deliver*, based on the valiant efforts of Jaime Escalante in East Los

Angeles, a math teacher who single-handedly educates scores of Mexican-American students, helping the overcome charges of "failure."

According to Green and Carl, as a policy tool for school "reform," state takeovers are pretty straightforward. Those urban school districts, characterized by "prolonged dismal performance … (such as standardized test performance, suspensions, expulsions, special educational placement, drop-out rates, graduation rates, and teacher absenteeism)," and who have demonstrated an "inability and/or unwillingness…to respond to this increasingly desperate situation," require significant institutional reform (R. L. Green and Carl 2000, 58). Thus, proponents of takeovers believe that traditional, democratic school governance itself is an obstacle to the pursuit and achievement of high-quality education, sound fiscal policies, and transparent governance. In other words, like Moe and Chubb, advocates of takeover charge that the democratic institution of the school board is itself a barrier to achievement.

Growing bipartisan support for state takeovers and other neoliberal school "reforms" designed to increase competition and improve performance culminated in the passage of one of the most significant federal interventions in public education ever: the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Conceptualized by the Bush administration and business leaders as a way to improve US competitiveness globally, the law was also presented as rectifying years of educational inequality and addressing the Black-white educational "achievement gap." During his 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush accepted an invitation to address the 91st Annual Convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Speaking to one of the nation's leading and oldest organizations concerned with Black civil rights, the future president made clear that "there's a tremendous gap of achievement between rich and poor, white and minority" creating a divided society (Bush 2000). And while he acknowledged that discrimination and

racism "is still a reality," he was there to discuss "another form of bias: the soft bigotry of low expectations." This form of bigotry, he claimed, caused Black students to be "segregated," "imprisoned," and "abandoned," not as a consequence of structural forces, but by educators who did not believe in the intellectual capacities of their students. The problem of the achievement gap, then, was a problem of educators who didn't push students in addition to students' own lack of confidence. This, according to Bush, was the new civil rights issue of our time. "The role of education," he announced "is to leave no child behind" (Bush 2000).

While state takeovers of urban school districts now constitutes a widespread phenomenon across the US, data regarding the effectiveness of these interventions are mixed at best. For example, Wong and Shen find that takeovers produce "modest and sometimes mixed achievement gains" (2003, 91). However, support for takeovers as a mechanism for educational "reform" is difficult to reconcile with the conclusions of several other studies which determined that takeovers do not have a positive impact on the educational or financial outcomes of school districts (Arsen and Mason 2013). In fact, reports from Detroit, Chicago, New Orleans, Washington D.C. and other school districts caution *against* takeovers, suggesting they may actually exacerbate existing problems, intensify racial segregation and inequality, all while introducing new challenges altogether (Lipman 2013; Buras 2014; Guyette 2015; Ewing 2018).

Neoliberal school reform, characterized by the rise of educational "policies and practices that privilege market strategies over public institutions to redress social issues" (Picower and Mayorga 2015, 5) have been embraced by many policymakers and the broader public as the best, if not only, solution to improving educational outcomes in America's urban spaces (Dawson 2003; Spence 2012). This is concerning because, as political scientist Domingo Morel correctly

points out in his recent award-winning study of state takeovers, we "know very little about why states take over local schools and which communities are more likely to experience takeovers. We also lack a systematic understanding of how takeovers affect communities. Moreover, since takeovers introduce state actors into local governance, what effects do takeovers have on local governance" (Morel 2018, 2). Conducting the most comprehensive analysis of educational takeovers to date, Morel found that one of the most significant consequence of takeovers is their resultant displacement of school officials and disenfranchisement of Black and Latino voters (2018, 61).

Therefore, this dissertation contributes to that dearth of data about school takeovers and expands on Morel's theory that "state takeovers of local school districts are about race and political power" (2018, 4), by demonstrating how takeover emerged as a policy tool by racial capitalists in Michigan to extract wealth from one low-income, majority Black school district. Thus, I argue that state takeovers of local school districts like DPS are a key institutional mechanism through which contemporary racial capitalism functions.

Numerous scholars have examined school "reform" as a response to global competition, shifting labor demands, bureaucratic inefficiencies, political corruption, and the transformation of the US economy. Still, other scholars have sought to understand the factors that stymie effective education "reform" (Stone et al. 2001; Henig and Rich 2003; M. Orr 1993; M. E. Orr and Stoker 1994; Henig et al. 2001; Hula and Jackson-Elmoore 2001). Whether one is a proponent of "reform" or critical of it, what seems to not be in doubt is that "reform" of some kind is needed. This dissertation starts from a different assumption. Drawing on recent insights by critical international relations scholars, sociologists, sociolinguists, and researchers in the field of critical education, I examine "reform" through the lens of language. By taking this

discursive approach to education "reform," this project can be classified as poststructuralist, and as such, assumes an important relationship between "the dynamics of discourse and power" (Escobar 2011, xlv).

Therefore, the goal of this study is not simply to describe the preconditions which made it possible to takeover DPS in 1999, but also to illustrate how takeovers are a vital mechanism through which racial capitalism maintains and legitimates ongoing dispossession of poor and working-class Blacks. While the specific contribution of this dissertation is to detail how this process of educational restructuring has unfolded in the context of Detroit's public-school system, its findings and implications have broader significance for scholarship on school takeovers, Detroit politics, and the political economy of Black cities.

LANGUAGING RACIAL CAPITALISM: INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE POWER OF DISCOURSE

Do we assume that language functions as a label for discrete objects or subjects in the world or that it is constitutive of the world? (Fierke 2004, 36)

My methodology draws principally from tools developed by critical linguists, postcolonial scholars, and political anthropologists. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Geneva Smitherman became a pioneer in the field of Critical Black Linguistics. Armed with the "intellectual background from the Black Tradition" she readily embraced "Critical Linguistics when it arrived upon the scene in the late 1970s," sharing the belief of those theorists that "the interconnections of language and society 'may be distorted out of vision,' and therefore a critical approach to language study will 'make visible the interconnections of things'" (Smitherman 2000, 7).

Smitherman's concerns about the relationship between language and the social world are shared by other social scientists. Political scientist Karin Fierke, quoted in the opening epigraph

for example, poses the question of whether or not language plays a constitutive role in the world we live in? As she observes, we "not only interact with nature, thereby transforming it, but with each other, forming, in the process, different types of culturally and historically specific practices and institutions that are also rule governed" (Fierke 2004, 36). This conceptualization of discourse is similar to political scientists Laffey and Weldes (2004) who define it as "structure and practices." They write that, "as structure, discourses are 'socio-cultural resources used by people' – and which use them – 'in the construction of meaning about their world and their activities'…As practice, they are structures of meaning-in-use" (2004, 28). Discourses shape meaning and action in the social world; in other words, "new ideas, objects, and practices" are brought into the world through an "interrelated body of texts," both written and spoken (Hardy, Harley, and Phillips 2004, 20).

By discourse, I do *not* mean to imply a narrow definition that is synonymous or reducible to language or words only. Instead, like postcolonial theorists, I understand a discourse "to be a structured, relational totality," that "delineates the terms of intelligibility whereby a particular 'reality' can be known and acted upon" (Doty 1996, 6). Thus, while discourse can refer to a body of texts or representations, it also refers to the social practices those representations are connected to, and the possibilities it creates or forestalls. Therefore, discourse analysis allows me to examine education "reform" as a distinct, interrelated realm of thought and action; a realm, in other words, of power.

Similar to Arturo Escobar's (2011, 5–6) important study of the emergence and consolidation of "development" of the "Third World" during the post-World War II era, considering education "reform" "in terms of discourse makes it possible to maintain the focus on domination…and at the same time explore more fruitfully the conditions of possibility and the

most pervasive effects of" reform. It allows us to step back from education "reform," by "bracketing its familiarity" so that we can analyze "the theoretical and practical context with which it has been associated" (Foucault qtd. in Escobar 2011, 6). This critical understanding of discourse compels us to reject any assumption that language is neutral, or simply an objective reflection of reality, or as the question above suggests, "a label for discrete objects or subjects in the world," and instead see it as political, and integral to the construction of reality and a central site of social contestation.

By thinking of education "reform" not simply "an area of theory and practice in which various policies have been enacted and theories formulated," but instead "a realm of politics wherein the very identities of peoples, states, and regions are constructed through representational practices" (Doty 1996, 2), I illustrate how power functions in Detroit through the discourse of "reform," shaping social relations both within and outside of Detroit. Because of the US' development as a racial capitalist state, race and white supremacy are key ideologies that inform hegemonic discourses in the US. Through the construction of objects and identities, the discourse of "reform" has enabled the possibility of distinct modes of domination and oppression, as well as resistance to them.

In examining racial politics through the discourse of education "reform" I seek to build on the work of Smitherman and her co-author H. Samy Alim, whose method of "languaging race," provides an innovative way to examine "the politics of race through the lens of language" (Alim and Smitherman 2012, 3). The authors explain the political import of this approach:

> Though language remains relatively unexamined by scholars of race and ethnicity, it plays a crucial role in the construction of racial and ethnic identities…"Language is often overlooked as an analytic concern in research on race, yet it is nonetheless central to how race is culturally understood"…In American public discourse, language is often overlooked as one of *the* most important cultural tools that we have for distinguishing ourselves from others.

> Language, no doubt, is a significant form of "symbolic power." Yet its central role in positioning each of us and the groups that we belong to along the social hierarchy lies largely beneath the average American's consciousness (Alim and Smitherman 2012, 3).

This approach to language developed by Smitherman forms an important, though not the only, component of the methodological framework developed here.

Escobar's work, and other political theorists who use the method of discourse analysis and institutional ethnography, often build on the scholarship of post-structural theorist Michel Foucault who saw power and knowledge as mutually constitutive, arguing "that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge," nor is there knowledge that doesn't assume and "constitute" power relations" (1995, 27). This position implies that the discovery of social "problems" or other types of knowledge is not natural, neutral, or inevitable, but rather "historically contingent and dependent on power relations that have already rendered a particular topic a legitimate object of investigation" (Abrahamsen 2000, 14). Unearthing how DPS "failure" became a legitimate topic of investigation and rendered an object of "reform" requires identifying the power relations that lie behind the knowledge and practices that constructed DPS as such.

This dissertation brings together two approaches: that of languaging race and, significantly, institutional ethnography. Institutional ethnography is a method that acknowledges the role of institutions in the discursive production of reality. Institutions, more than individuals, occupy a unique role in the production of "facts" and "knowledge," this method holds, and "facts must be seen as an aspect of social organization, a practice of knowing that, through the use of ready-made-categories, constructs objects as external to the knower and independent of him or her" (Escobar 1994, 107). And because "often decisions are made by centralized organizations

headed by representatives of ruling groups, the whole work of organizations is biased in relation to those in power" (Escobar 2011, 107). Cohen notes that through their "control of institutions, dominant groups (and more privileged marginal group members) not only constrain access to dominant resources, but also disseminate ideologies of marginalization that seek to explain the exclusion of certain groups" (Cohen 1999, 45). The dominant group in the US which this study is focused on are what I refer to as racial capitalists: white capitalists and those white and non-whites elites who enjoy a privileged status due to their proximity or control over political, social and economic resources and, as a result, wield some influence over other individuals and social groups.

Still, for greater clarity on the method of institutional ethnography, I quote Escobar at length:

> From the perspective of institutional ethnography, a local situation is less a case study than an entry point to the study of institutional and discursive forces and how these are related to larger socioeconomic processes. What is important is to describe the actual practices organizing people's everyday experience, 'to disclose the non-local determinations of locally historic or lived orderliness.' In the case of institutions, it is necessary to investigate…how local course of action are articulated by institutional functions: in other words, how a textually mediated discourse substitutes for the actual relations and practices of the 'beneficiaries,' burying the latter's experience in the matrix that organizes the institution's representation (2011, 109).

Therefore, this study will be examining several key representational practices of racial capitalists, and more specifically, the institutions they control or influence.

This study identifies numerous representational practices at work in the education "reform" discourse. These practices include naturalization, classification, surveillance, negation, and positioning (Doty 1996, 10–11). The data I collected that is associated with the method of institutional ethnography includes documents from public and private institutions, speeches, newspaper articles, books, and archival data from Wayne State University.

I investigate the documentary practices of three institutions promoting education "reform in Detroit: the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, Michigan state government, and New Detroit, Inc. The Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a state think-tank, will be a major focus of chapter two, and I will be drawing from all of their education-related documents published between 1987 and 1999. In addition, chapter two will also look at the role of New Detroit, Inc. – a non-profit organization in Detroit – in the construction and mobilization of the "reform" discourse.

For public documents, I will be drawing on the speeches of Governor John Engler, as well as other public officials at the federal, state and local level. Archival data collected from Wayne State University (WSU) specifically includes the papers and records of David Adamany, the first Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Detroit Public Schools Reform Board in 1999. I also collected archival data from the papers of William Beckham Jr., President and CEO of both New Detroit and the Skillman Foundation, while simultaneously serving as the Vice-Chairman of the Detroit Public Schools Reform Board. Both Adamany, as the former President of WSU, and Beckham, a leading Black figure in Detroit's business and philanthropic world, held immense institutional power, and therefore I argue that their ideas disproportionately contributed to constructing a hegemonic belief about "reform" in Detroit. Newspaper articles and a biography covering John Engler's tenure as Governor of Michigan published by Gleaves Whitney (2002), Engler's former speech writer, will also be useful in the analysis, providing background information and key contextual information.

I also use in-depth interviews (IDIs), which are designed to "generate data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences" in order to understand how and why local public-school stakeholders in Detroit perceived and responded to education reform in distinct ways (Crouch and McKenzie 2006, 485). By selecting the Paul Robeson Malcolm X Academy

(PRMXA), a public-school in Detroit affected by state takeover, and conducting IDIs with key informant (KI) within and outside of the school who have a critical and/or comprehensive understanding of, and experience with this mode of education "reform, I shed light on the distinct ways Black Detroit residents engaged with the neoliberal "reform" of DPS. IDIs were conducted with key informants who were identified based on their proximity to, and experiences with, the 1999 takeover of DPS. I selected PRMXA as a site to begin my interviews because of its founding as a response to the African-Centered Education movement in Detroit of 1991. As such, PRMXA reflects an alternative, non-hegemonic vision of public education in Detroit. The school, but specifically the KI I interviewed, were all connected to DPS during the 1999 takeover. In total, I conducted 11 interviews.

To be clear, the goal of these interviews is not to argue that a certain percentage of parents, guardians, teachers, or school officials resisted or supported takeover, but rather to uncover some of the ways and reasons various stakeholders in the district responded to the takeover.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

This dissertation is divided into four remaining chapters. Each chapter examines a crucial dimension of the neoliberal education "reform" discourse and corresponds to a distinct data set. Chapter one, "A New Framework for Public Education in Michigan": Constructing 'Reform,'" reviews a key report produced by Michigan's Department of Education, in partnership with Michigan State University, to highlight key representational practices which undergird the "reform" discourse. Based on a close, textual analysis of *A New Framework for Public Education in Michigan*, I demonstrate how certain representational practices have been deployed

and functioned together to create a theory of public school "failure," but one that is fundamentally racialized.

Chapter two, titled "Taking Over Detroit Public Schools: 'Reform,' Discourse and the Construction of School 'Failure,'" illustrates how the "reform" discourse was developed in Michigan and how it was deployed to construct DPS as a "failed" district ultimately requiring state takeover. The dominant groups in Michigan responsible for constructing this discourse include the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, Michigan's political leadership, as well as Black elites in Detroit. More than describing the "reform" discourse, this chapter provides a clearer outlook of the "reform" apparatus – the complex institutional and social relations which undergird and promote the discourse

Chapter three, titled, "The Effects of 'Reform': Resistance and the Political Economy of School 'Failure'" describes the impact of the "reform" discourse on Detroit's public-school system as well as key stakeholders during the time of the takeover. It does so, first, by examining the growth of the charter market during the takeover period and reviews the highly-contested administration of the 1994 school bond initiative by "reform" leaders. Then, using in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in DPS, including long-time grassroots activists, reveals the myriad ways local residents challenged the takeover and sought to redefine or resist "reform"

In the last chapter, titled "Racial Capitalism and the Anti-Politics Machine: Rethinking School 'Reform' and Black Politics in the 21st Century," I conclude by briefly summarizing and reflecting on the findings of this study. I discuss the effects of education "reform" on Black citizenship today and suggest what it might portend for the future of Black education in Detroit and racial capitalism more broadly.

CHAPTER ONE

"A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION IN MICHIGAN": CONSTRUCTING "REFORM"

> It is important to define the objective of designing an alternative structure for the provision of schooling for the K-12 students in Michigan. The conceptual and empirical evidence point to deficiencies in the current system of schooling; the deficiencies result in the provision of a product that does not serve the interests of all students in the system. While high income, white suburban families are served well by the current system, many others are not. The objective of a new framework is to establish a system that serves the interests of the public, regardless of the socioeconomic status of the individuals being served, irrespective of the racial background of the individuals, and inclusive of all other characteristics of the individuals to be schooled (Allen and Toma 1996).

To examine the structure and logic behind the "reform" discourse on Detroit, I will conduct a close textual analysis of a study commissioned by the Michigan Department of Education in 1995. Entitled, *A New Framework for Public Education in Michigan: A Report* (I will also use "*The Report*" as an abbreviation), the final document was published in September 1996, just months before Governor John Engler would first announce his intentions to take over "failing" schools in Michigan. *The Report* was the most significant study on education "reform" in Michigan commissioned by the state's Dept. of Education during the 1990s. This study was co-authored by the Dean of Michigan State University's James Madison College, Richard B. Allen and economist Eugenia F. Toma at the University of Kentucky. Together, Allen, a political theorist, and Eugenia, who was the Dean of the Martin School of Public Policy and Administration at Kentucky, produced a political economic report advocating for a new, market-based public school system in Michigan. With $150,000 from the Michigan Dept. of Education and "substantial financial support" from billionaire manufacturing tycoon, and charter school

magnate, J.C. Huizenga[3], their report not only reflected the state's interest but those of the corporate sector as well.

The groundbreaking report, its authors write, "was undertaken at the behest of the State Department of Education on behalf of the Governor of the state of Michigan, John Engler…This study proposes a plan that empowers parents to make real choices concerning the schools their children attend. We advocate provisions by which all K through 12 education will be non-governmentally operated" (Allen and Toma 1996). Moreover, Allen and Toma acknowledge that their study "suggests a far-reaching change in the apparatus by which the State supports public education," noting, reassuringly, that its "natural for responsible individuals to pause before embracing so through a change" (Allen and Toma 1996). Nevertheless, "state-run schools hamper the administration of education." The problem was clear. "The inability of government and education officials throughout the state to promote market-oriented adaptation explains why public schooling fails to satisfy the changing demands of parents and children" (Allen and Toma 1996).

The powerful study would go on to examine the school system, describe its "failures" in great empirical detail, and conclude by offering a "new framework" for education. The study offered an intellectual, "objective," *scientific,* framework – or *justification* – for the corporate vision of school "reform." Led by Allen and Toma, this political economic study of Michigan's schools system was upfront about its intention to redefine "public education" on the one hand, and on the other, define "reform." In a section of the report titled, "What is Public Education,"

[3] Huizenga established the National Heritage Academies (NHA) in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1995, the same year he funded this study. Today, NHA is Michigan's largest charter company, and one of the largest in the nation (Dixon 2014).

Allen and Toma's description is important, for they make clear their objective is to transform the very *meaning* of "education" through "reform."

As I examine *The Report*, I am less concerned about the specific characteristics of the new system of public education Allen and Toma advocate – a school system where all citizens would be "shareholders" – than the fundamental logic that governs that vision. In other words, I use *The Report*, which was the most comprehensive market-based model of "reform" the state had up to that point, in order to illustrate the key representational practices used to construct DPS as "failed." Indeed, these practices not only shape the report, but the report itself reproduces many of these practices. Stated differently, the report is implicated in the very representational practices that have contributed to the broader reform discourse that made it possible to takeover DPS. This report helped discursively construct the preconditions for education reform generally and its particular manifestation in Detroit, school takeover.

In the following section, I will analyze each major section of *A New Framework for Public Education in Michigan: A Report*. Including the Forward, *The Report* has seven major sections. In the textual analysis below, the major sections are capitalized, centered and quoted, while selected sub-sections included are written in title case, italicized, centered, and quoted.

"A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION IN MICHIGAN": A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

"FORWARD"

"A Clean Start: The Mandate for Education"

> Americans bathe everyday, and in doing so set themselves apart from almost all other peoples and, indeed, from their own forbears not much longer than a generation ago. The fact of Americans' frequent bathing is a triumph of public education which challenges the evidence of public schools' pervasive failure to generate avid learners with equal facility. Increasingly, however, people conceive that "common" schools perform certain tasks (such as the indoctrination crucial to

> personal hygiene) better than others (such as the inspiration needed to launch a career of learning).
>
> Nevertheless, it is still the case that we may anticipate a mandate to do something regarding the perceived failures of public education. That mandate will doubtless center on the incongruity identified above, namely that public schools, when they undertook to inculcate habits of personal hygiene succeeded beyond imagination but have not attained like success with respect to inculcating habits of personal mental hygiene. We may fairly conclude that a monolithic organization and lock-step approach for some reason work in the one case but not in the other. That, in turn, will produce a demand for devolution and decentralization in education, precisely in proportion as people conceive that the goal of producing avid learners is infinitely more valuable than that of producing bodily cleanliness (Allen and Toma 1996).

There are several important points to address in this Forward. First, we are told that, increasingly, citizens in the US believe that their public school system has "failed." Through an odd analogy, Allen and Toma argue that "'common' schools" were successful in teaching people how to bathe yet have "failed" in "indoctrinating" citizens with "personal mental hygiene." In other words, they excelled at the former task, and were extremely unsuccessful in the latter. And, given the "perceived failures of public education," he writes, "we" can expect a "mandate" to address this educational "failure." That "mandate" for change will rest on the core contradiction of the "incongruity" between the existing public school system – a "monolithic organization" with a "lock-step approach" – and the production of "avid learners." This is a crucial claim, as Allen and Toma introduce a reason – an explanation – for the problem of "failure." Here, and throughout the report, "failure" is seen as a consequence of the structure of the public school system. Thus, "the mandate for education" rests on establishing "a clean start," creating something that doesn't replicate the problems generated by the existing "monolithic organization" of government-run schools.

Also, though relatedly, the only solution to this "failure" is "devolution and decentralization in education" (Allen and Toma 1996). We are told that as more people realize

producing “avid learners” is “infinitely more valuable” than bathing their demand for a new system will increase “proportionally.” Leaving aside whether or not one thinks this trade-off is acceptable or even necessary, what is doubtless is the course of action that must be pursued: “devolution,” or the transfer, in this case, of government power to market-actors, and “decentralization,” or the diffusion of educational decision-making across a wider number of actors. These two principles must inform any new public education framework.

“A Brief History of Education”

In this section, Allen and Toma reframe the history of public education in the US, suggesting that, in “large part, both American political culture and educational policy have been shaped by a commitment to equality” (1996). This statement, especially for many Black scholars, is extremely dubious. The reservations of these critics are only strengthened as one continues to read through Allen and Toma’s study. What is important to note, however, is that this sub-section, “A Brief History of Education” appears immediately after the sub-section in the Forward titled “A Clean Start: The Mandate for Education”. Its location is important. To fully understand and contextualize the public “mandate” constructed by Allen and Toma, they must first explain how this mandate came to be. Why, in fact, is there a mandate? It is this section that establishes the background – the historical *reality* – necessary for the arguments developed in the Report. It is in this section that we begin to understand the nature of the problem. In other words, this history section plays a strategic function, as it helps establish the preconditions for any “reform” advocated today; it explains the origins of the public school system, its values, and how it eventually became a “failure.” Once we understand, how and why the public school system “failed,” we are in a better position to accept Allen and Toma’s “New Framework for Public Education in Michigan.” The “Brief History” section opens stating that:

> Mass education has been this country's most important domestic social policy. The idea of schooling for all has had a powerful hold on American political consciousness since the founding era. In large part, both American political culture and educational policy have been shaped by a commitment to equality. Thus, the rise of common schools in the United States in the 1830s is attributed to Jacksonian notions of social equality as the means to uplift all Americans by providing free elementary education for every child (Allen and Toma 1996).

While there is no doubt some truth in this passage, what is particularly jarring are the glaring omissions. This passage stands out because it obscures or overlooks two very important historical facts in 1830 – African enslavement and the foundations of "Jacksonian notions of social equality." We should note that this passage is one of several that overlooks or obscures the political issue of race and racial conflict in shaping educational access and outcomes in the US. To assert that "American political cultural and educational policy" was committed to "equality" in 1830 contradicts the historical record, and any trained historian, or student of American politics, should know this. The idea, for example, that the notion of "social equality" during the presidency of Andrew Jackson meant "schooling for all" is patently false. Indeed, Jackson's presidency marks the so-called rise of the "common" man, but the basis of this "new kind of government," as Baptist writes, was built on "white men's equal access to manhood and citizenship on the disenfranchisement of everyone else" (Baptist 2016, 224). Educational historian James D. Anderson describes the reality of schooling and "social equality" for most Blacks during Jacksonian democracy, and the first half of the nineteenth century more broadly.

> The successful campaign to contain and repress literacy among enslaved Americans triumphed just as the crusade for popular education for free people began to flourish. Between 1800 and 1835, most of the southern states enacted legislation making it a crime to teach enslaved children to read or write. In contrast, a massive campaign to achieve popular schooling for free Americans developed between 1830 and 1860, and out of this campaign emanated designs for state systems of public education. By the end of the antebellum period a majority of the states had established public school systems, and nearly half of the nation's free children were already getting some formal education (J. D. Anderson 1988, 2)

It was during the rise of Jacksonian democracy, the period of "common schools" which *The Report* refers to that, at least for Blacks, the prospect of social equality was actually becoming more remote. Nevertheless, I will come back to the issue of race again in this report.

This sub-section of the Forward also reviews various school reform efforts, including homeschooling and more recent reform ideas. The idea which they are most interested comes from the work of two political scientists, Terry Moe and John Chubb, who published *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* in 1990. Similar to *The Report,* Moe and Chubb advocate "replacing educational establishments with a market approach that would allow parents and children the freedom to choose their own schools, regardless of residency." Allen and Toma go on to embrace Moe and Chubb's belief that, in order for schools to "survive" they will have to treat students like consumers. As a result, "only the best schools will survive. The end result will be innovative approaches to education and an overall improvement in educational capacities" (Allen and Toma 1996). It is the "dynamic aspect" of Moe and Chubb's "market approach," we are told, that "advances the discussion of efforts at reform." Growing out of the conclusions of Moe and Chubb, Allen and Toma write that an important question *The Report* considers is "whether public education requires the direct, public administration of educational enterprises" (1996). In other words, must public schools be democratically (or, in other words, "publicly") governed?

The justifications put forth in favor of public governance of education, *The Report* argues, are not compelling. "The argument for democratic socialization has been embarrassed by the reality of wide-spread drug use and other social dysfunctions in public schools. Clearly, socialization in bad habits is not a defense of public schools. And the argument for universal literacy has encountered the reality that, in proportion as public schooling has become more

universal literacy levels have become less universal." As a result, the only remaining argument in favor of public schools, according to Allen and Toe, was the "'safety net' fallacy, since no one has ever argued that public schools were in themselves necessary for any learning whatever" (Allen and Toma 1996). We should take a moment to review some of these claims, especially given that they are mobilized in order re-define the meaning of public education away from a democratically-controlled, public good, to a market-based, privately governed but publicly funded commodity.

First, Allen and Toma assert that as public schooling in the US increased, literacy levels declined. Like many claims in *The Report*, the authors simply state this proposition without any evidence. In fact, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) powerfully refutes Allen and Toma's claim of an inverse relationship between public school enrollment and literacy rates, as demonstrated in Table 1 and Table 2. Table 1, which is based on data from the NCES, shows the change in total school enrollment in the US by race from 1850 to 1970. Given that more than three-fourths of students have historically attended public schools in the US since records were first kept (Snyder 1993, 45–46), this total school enrollment serves as a strong proxy for public school enrollment. Since 1850, public school enrollment has increased significantly for all groups, but especially for African Americans. African American enrollment expanded significantly after the Civil War in during the 1860s, and by 1970 more than 80% of the Black population in the US was enrolled in the nation's public school system. The percentage of all Americans enrolled in school between 1850 and 1970 increased from 47.2% to almost 88%.

Year	Total	White	Negro and Other Races
1850	47.2	56.2	1.8
1860	50.6	59.6	1.9
1870	48.4	54.4	9.9
1880	57.8	62	33.8
1890	54.3	57.9	32.9
1900	50.5	53.6	31.1
1910	59.2	61.3	44.8
1920	64.3	65.7	53.5
1930	69.9	71.2	60.3
1940	74.8	75.6	68.4
1950	78.7	79.3	74.8
1960	84.4	84.8	81.5
1970	87.9	88.3	85.3

Table 1**.** School Enrollment Rates per 100 persons by race: 1850 to 1970

Source: *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1993.

While Table 1 tracks the nation's rising public school enrollment, Table 2 illustrates the nation's rising literacy rates between 1870 and 1980. According to federal statistics, 20% of all US citizens were illiterate in 1870, while less than one percent were illiterate by the end of the 1970s. An even greater change can be found in the literacy rates of Black Americans. During the same period, 1870-1979, illiteracy in the Black community plummeted from almost 80% to less than 2%. Together, Table 1 and Table 2 provide strong counter-evidence to Allen and Toma's simple assertion about the inverse relationship between enrollment and literacy. What is striking, of course, is that this data is neither difficult to find nor unknown. Thus, Allen and Toma's assertions about the "failures" of public school must be seen as intentional distortions – representations that, although factually inaccurate are, nevertheless, productive.

	Total	White			Black and other
		Total	Native	Foreign-born	
1870	20	11.5	-	-	79.9
1880	17	9.4	8.7	12	70
1890	13.3	7.7	6.2	13.1	56.8
1900	10.7	6.2	4.6	12.9	44.5
1910	7.7	5	3	12.7	30.5
1320	6	4	2	13.1	23
1930	4.3	3	1.6	10.8	16.4
1940	2.9	2	1.1	9	11.5
1947	2.7	1.8	-	-	11
1950	3.2	-	-	-	-
1952	2.5	1.8	-	-	10.2
1959	2.2	1.6	-	-	7.5
1969	1	0.7	-	-	3.6
1979	0.6	0.4	-	-	1.6

Table 2**.** Percentage of Persons 14 years old and over who were illiterate (unable to read or write in any language), by race and nativity: 1870 to 1979

Source: *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1993.

"What Is Public Education?"

This section works to reframe the meaning of public education. As the first sentence of the section states, "public education may be defined instrumentally as the provision for well nigh universal literacy and numeracy," yet, we would do "well not to confuse the public purpose with the public means" (Allen and Toma 1996). In other words, just because public funds are spent on education it does not mean that it must be publicly administered. Instead, Allen and Toma argue that education can be a "product" delivered by institutions other that the "government." Thus, for "all practical purposes, schools are free when available to parents of children without cost. Nothing more is required to establish a 'system' of public education" (Allen and Toma 1996).

“INTRODUCTION”

> *Purpose of this Project.* This study was undertaken at the behest of the State Department of Education on behalf of the Governor of the state of Michigan, John Engler, and consistent with the objectives in the Department’s Request for Proposals, entitled *A New Framework for Public Education*. (RFP No. 95-SBE). This study proposes a plan that empowers parents to make real choices concerning the schools their children attend. We advocate provisions by which all K through 12 education will be non-governmentally operated. We propose to eliminate all jurisdictional barriers to school selection. No single structure of educational governance would be imposed by the State,
>
> The inability of government and education officials throughout the state to promote market-oriented adaptation explains why public schooling fails to satisfy the changing demands of parents and children. Current state-sponsored thinking about the way to organize public education enervates the institutions of civil society by weakening, if not restricting, the choices families can make. This approach to education, in a nation as diverse as ours, actually works to promote conflict. Public education would benefit from an approach providing greater flexibility as conflicts between parents and administrators arise, lowering the risks involved in the process. More importantly, it would facilitate a natural arena in which improved methods could evolve without imperiling the entire structure of public education.
>
> Educational officials have failed to provide most parents with alternatives to state-run schools. Put bluntly: parents are required by law to send their children to schools (with little opportunity on their part for informed choice in the matter). Where else in the United States would we permit business to be run this way? It does not surprise, therefore, when few parents throughout the state are satisfied with the quality of education their children receive. Only a system that removes from the hands of the state the operation of schools and concentrates choice in the hands of parents can change fundamentally the way Michigan educates her children.
>
> Our goal is to reorient the means by which public education is delivered; to supplant existing barriers that sustain the status quo; to channel innovative resources in the direction of market forces dedicated to the best interests of the children. Our purpose is to offer a principled document advocating responsible change, yet one accessible to the average citizen (Allen and Toma 1996).

In the Introduction, for the first time, Allen and Toma ground their reform discourse in *A Nation at Risk,* published in 1983. While they argue that it was a “sensible” report, one that had noble intentions, one that “felt compelled to advocate for change,” there were nevertheless

problems with it (Allen and Toma 1996). *The Report* builds on *A Nation at Risk,* but also differentiates itself from the document as well. For Allen and Toma, *A Nation at Risk* was a good start with noble intentions as it advocated for "change." Yet, "the report itself fell short…by going to war without adequate 'arms.' Although it made many recommendations sensible observers can support, it did not provide means to implement them" (Allen and Toma 1996). Thus, the "primary problem with the report, then, is that it perpetuated the current status of public schools as government monopolies."

"LITERATURE SURVEY"

> Popular portrayals of the Chubb and Moe work have summed the findings in a single word: *bureaucracy*. The mechanisms that have evolved over time in the U.S. to guarantee democratic control of public schools have displaced the limited autonomy and control by the schools over their own product. The political institutions that govern the schools and the move toward centralization have stifled the incentive to innovate and limited the ability of schools to respond to changing environmental constraints and changing societal demands. Achievement in private schools is higher because of the more flexible environment offered to teachers and administrators. The authors conclude with a rather strong admonition that problems in public education will remain uncorrected without fundamental, structural changes including the introduction of choice in schooling (Allen and Toma 1996).

In this section, *The Report* argues democracy, or "bureaucratic," control of public schools is what stifles their innovation and is a major factor in school "failure." Reviewing various scholarship concerning the effectiveness of public schools, Allen and Toma conclude that it is the institutional structure of the public school system that is the problem, not lack of resources or any other issue. Comparing public education to school privatization efforts in Chile, New Zealand, France Belgium, and countries in Eastern Europe, *The Report* suggests that other countries reform efforts are instructive for the US, and "have proved instructive in developing an alternative framework for the provision of schooling in Michigan" (Allen and Toma 1996).

“ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF THE DESIRED ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT IN SCHOOL PROVISION”

> A public good is one that exhibits two characteristics: it is a good from which it is high cost to exclude beneficiaries and one person can consume benefits from the good without infringing on the benefits consumable by another person. In other words, public goods are goods that generate benefits simultaneously for multiple persons…The issue for this portion of the project is to identify potential sources of market failure and free-rider behavior in the production or consumption of education. In particular, is education a public good? The answer is no…As a result, there is conceptually not a public goods argument for public production of schooling (Allen and Toma 1996).

According to Allen and Toma, education is not a public good because its beneficiaries can be excluded from accessing it at a relatively low cost: “it is low cost to exclude potential beneficiaries of schooling. Individuals or institutions can produce ‘education’ for an individual or a group but do so in an exclusionary fashion at very low cost” (1996). For the authors, the ability to exclude individuals from education at a low cost provides sufficient grounds for reconceptualizing education as a private, and not public, good.

“BENEFITS AND COST OF CURRENT SYSTEM”

“Summary”

> Incidental to the regression results, we have found that Michigan public schools are stratified by geographic location, race and income. For most geographic regions in Michigan, graduation rates are between 70.66 to 83.82 percent, and dropout rates are between 4.22 and 7.69 percent. Large Central City regions (Detroit) have a graduation rate of 36.2 percent and dropout rate of 26.2 percent. This suggests that location of residence is an indicator of the success of a student finishing high school…[T]he majority of the students in Detroit schools are black. White students reside outside of Detroit.
>
> While the characteristics of the parents and the students’ past test taking ability are important factors, we find that present income or poverty and race are determinants in how well students perform in the present system. Low income students or students in free lunch programs on average gain the least. Also, black students are also shown to gain the least as compared to white students. It is the high income, white students who gain the most under the present educational

> system. These results are consistent with the literature and are quite robust as they are repeatedly found in both cross-sectional and time series analysis using different measures of educational attainment (Allen and Toma 1996).

This section uses a regression model to "determine the winners and losers" in Michigan's public school system during mid-1990s (Allen and Toma 1996). The authors used various data sources to analyze "the effectiveness of Michigan's primary and secondary schools," drawing on data from Michigan's Dept. of Education and the NCES. The major educational variables used were dropout and graduate rates from academic years 1991-92 through 1993-94, and 4th, 5th and 7th grade Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) Scores from academic year 1994-95. The findings, as the quote from the section above states, suggest that DPS and other low-income, Black, urban areas suffer the most from the existing public school system. This, then, serves as another example for Allen and Toma, as to why there is a need for a new system of education: to save poor, urban Blacks from a system in which they are currently "losers."

"AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK"

Here, *The Report*, states that the "very structure of the current system contributes to the problems characterizing the schools," and goes on to describe both the "structural deficiencies of the current system" and an "alternative, market-based structure for the production of education" (Allen and Toma 1996). According to Allen and Toma, under the existing, public school system citizens do not control the school system, bureaucrats do. Their goal, however, under a new school system, is to make citizens owners or shareholders in schools. Only by changing the structure of public education in Michigan and by giving citizens "ownership" or "shares" in their schools will these institutions begin to produce more "avid learners" (Allen and Toma 1996).

A key objective of this alternative framework of education is to provide more effective schooling to a broader swath of citizens in Michigan:

> The conceptual and empirical evidence point to deficiencies in the current system of schooling; the deficiencies result in the provision of a product that does not serve the interests of all students in the system. While high income, white suburban families are served well by the current system, many others are not. The objective of a new framework is to establish a system that serves the interests of the public, regardless of the socioeconomic status of the individuals being served, irrespective of the racial background of the individuals, and inclusive of all other characteristics of the individuals to be schooled (Allen and Toma 1996).

What is important here, again, is how the new framework of public education is positioned as a solution to racial disparities in test scores and other educational variables. The public school system works well for affluent, white communities, but not for poor, urban Black ones like Detroit. Only a market-based solution – the alternative framework – then, can bring about more effective educational outcomes.

"EMPIRICAL ASSEMENT OF THE NEW FRAMEWORK"

This final section of *The Report* closes by examining the performance of public school systems in the US compared to the educational performance of schools in five other countries. Once again, *The Report* finds that private schooling is superior to public schooling, further bolstering its authors' claims about the efficacy of market-based education. Allen and Toma conclude by stating that their "study suggests that policy reforms concerning school finance require attention to school control issues as well" (1996). For them, it is the market, not the state, that should be governing or controlling educational institutions.

THE PRODUCTION OF "EDUCATIONAL FAILURE": THE CASE OF DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

This section describes some of the key representational practices that informed the document above and the "reform" discourse more generally. *The Report* illustrates various representational practices associated with the establishment of hegemonic discourses, chief among them is the practice of naturalization. Naturalization occurs through the stating of

objective “facts,” a process which establishes background information or “knowledge” which can be assumed to be true (Doty 1996, 10). *The Report*, for example, stated that the “argument for democratic socialization has been embarrassed by the reality of wide-spread drug use and other social dysfunctions in public schools.” In other words, *The Report* is establishing the fact, or the “reality” that advocates of democratically controlled schools have no legitimate basis upon which to advocate for public education because “wide-spread drug use” and other “dysfunctions” plague those schools. This practice of naturalization occurred often, especially in defining schools as “failures” and in need of “reform.” As these statements became taken for granted, background assumption, it allowed for other assumptions and market-based schemes to proceed.

Classification is another representation practice closely linked with that of naturalization and may well be the most vital tool in the “reform” discourse. “The construction of classificatory scheme often serves to naturalize by placing huma beings into the categories in which they ‘naturally’ belong. Hierarchies are often established based upon presumed essential character of various kinds of human beings” (Doty 1996, 10). Testing, dropout rates, and other forms of “data” are crucial technologies of the “reform” discourse and serve as the basis for classification schemes which the label and categorize students, parents, teachers, and districts as “failed” or “successful.” However, as was argued by Kirkland (2010) in chapter one, testing is itself both racial and political. Moreover, even when these measures are used, they are often manipulated or used to make a political case and not one based on a more judicious assessment of the very data referenced.

For example, there is evidence to suggest that the negative appraisal of school achievement in Detroit, like other large urban school districts, may be overstated or politicized, specifically when it comes to graduation rates (Berliner and Biddle 1995). Research by Stone,

Henig, Jones and Pierannunzi shows that "the percentage of adults who dropped out before completing high school" in Detroit has declined between 1960 and 1990, and "the proportion having completed college has dramatically increased" during that same period (2001, 63). While 65.6% of all adults and 73.5% of all Black adults in Detroit dropped out of high school in 1960, the number plummeted to 37.9% and 37.4% in 1990 respectively. Similarly, the share of adults in Detroit with a college degree rose from 5.3% in 1960 to 9.6% in 1990. This change was even more pronounced among Blacks: in 1960, only 2.9% had a college education whereas 8.4% had one in 1990, more than doubling the population's higher educational attainment (Stone et al. 2001, 63). That the dropout rate was basically cut in half in Detroit and increasing numbers of citizens were graduating from college would seem to be a promising, if not laudatory, achievement for the city's public school system. Nevertheless, the dominant trend towards education reform persists.

Rules of the discourse can also be delineated from the Report. Several issues never come up; indeed, some of which seem to be intentionally avoided. For example, as was mentioned above, the issue of slavery during the antebellum period, and its barrier to educational equality was conveniently overlooked in an era of "Jacksonian social equality." Moreover, there was no analysis of the impact of the white political backlash to the Great Migration during the post-World War II period, or its well-documented impact on the school funding and politics. These silences are intentional and political. By erasing these histories, this document not only constructs an image of Black educational "failure," but it also constructs an image of "success," "equality," and "achievement" that is centered around an idyllic vision of a white America.

Ultimately, these representational practices and other explored in the dissertation help establish not only preconditions for the state takeover of DPS – for example, by constructing

DPS as “failed” – but also justify those interventions as well. These justifications can be based on humanitarian overtures, economic concerns, or genuine interest in educational change. The key is that the discourse itself is productive and continues to operate in ways that allows for DPS to be acted upon with little agency.

CHAPTER TWO

TAKING OVER DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS: "REFORM," DISCOURSE & THE CONSTRUCTION OF SCHOOL "FAILURE"

The education "reform" discourse in Michigan is not only articulated in reports and documents like those produced by the Michigan Department of Education. Its effects are also felt through policies, programs, and other state and nonstate actions. This chapter examines how the origins and evolutions of the "reform" discourse as articulated through public and private institutions in Michigan during the 1990s and analyzes its effects on DPS. By doing so, I provide a detailed account – though by no means exhaustive – of how the "reform" apparatus functioned to construct DPS as "failed" to justify a state "takeover." I will focus primarily on the contributions to the discourse by three key actors: the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, the State of Michigan, and the non-profit organization New Detroit. Three primary, though related, school "reforms" will be examined here: 1) school "choice," 2) charter schools, and 3) state takeover[4]. As will be shown, the takeover was a mechanism through which these other two "reforms" were expanded.

A DISCOURSE IS BORN: THE MACK ATTACK AND THE EDUCATIONAL "REVOLUTION" IN MICHIGAN

"The best way to make significant impact is to change the climate of opinion."
-*Mackinac Center for Public Policy*

As President Ronald Reagan's conservative revolution at the national level seemed to be winding down during the late 1980s, many conservatives were committed to continuing their struggle against the overreach of the US racial capitalist state, particularly at the urban level. In

[4] I was able to identify a fourth proposal to expand the privatization of public education in Michigan that would have far reaching consequences for Detroit Public Schools, however, it seems like it did not receive any significant traction and therefore, in the interest of space, it will not be included as part of this study.

Michigan, these efforts culminated in the founding of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in 1987 (MCPP 2020). Since its founding in 1987, The Mackinac Center has moved to Midland, Michigan, home of one of its largest and original donors – Dow Chemical. In fact, Dow, like other major US corporations at the time were busy "adopting" states with the goal of using their political and financial influence to transform educational policy at the state level. Shortly after the Mackinac Center was founded six companies, along with Dow, adopted the state of Michigan, and with the leadership of Kmart's CEO Joseph Antonini, established the Michigan Business Roundtable (Sipple 1999, 449).

While this dissertation does not focus on this Business Roundtable, it is useful to recall the concerns voiced there by the nation's leading CEOs, especially since the Mackinac Center was funded by at least one of these companies. As one researcher who consulted with the Business Roundtable recalls, when business leaders "looked at schools they saw inefficiency, poor management, a lack of accountability, a stagnating union, and graduates who needed remedial (and expensive!) training before they could effectively work with the encroaching technological advances on the showroom and shop floor" (Sipple 1999, 459). Interestingly, this same observer notes that "while the MI-Roundtable readily identified perceived problems with the public schools, ascertaining strategies and solutions proved more vexing" (Sipple 1999, 459).

The Center's largest donors include Betsy DeVos, Dow Chemical, the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and numerous other corporations and nonprofits organizations. Michigan's first neoliberal state think-tank, the Mackinac Center quickly expanded, and is now one of the largest, most well-funded state-level think tanks in the nation. The Mackinac Center is also part of a highly-influential network of lawyers and legal activists who identify as "economic libertarians," who are dramatically reshaping "the way in which property rights are being

understood" in the US (Hatcher 2004, 336). Indeed, the Center's power reaches far beyond Michigan, shaping policy debates, public opinion, and actual law across the country (Clark 2013). Created by then state senator John Engler and two other influential Republican leaders, the Center was first established no more than a hundred feet from the Michigan's state legislature (Clarkson 1999). Three years later Engler would be elected governor of the state, giving birth to an educational "revolution" in Michigan.

Until then, there was nothing that called for seeing charter schools, or "choice" as part of, and certainly not *the*, primary means of educational change in Michigan. The Mackinac Center was the first organization in Michigan calling for education "reform," specifically defined as "choice" or "market-based" education, and, as I will show, no other "nonpartisan" institution in Michigan did more to advance this meaning of "reform." The "reform" discourse, which only entered the public lexicon in 1983, was still primarily controlled by two populations in the state: educators and, particularly in the case of Detroit, working-class African Americans and local racial capitalists. However, the efforts by these two constituencies – efforts that sometimes conflicted - were unable to significantly reverse the educational "crisis" in Detroit. Although high school dropout rates in Detroit had declined significantly between 1960 and 1990 for all adults in the city, and the share of city adults with a college education increased dramatically over that same time as well, the Black Nationalist dream of a self-determined, autonomous Detroit, nevertheless, seemed to be slipping away.

The 1990 gubernatorial election of Republican John Engler ushered in a new era of education "reform" in Michigan, with devastating consequences for DPS. Just days after Engler achieved a stunning victory over two-term, incumbent Gov. James Blanchard, the Mackinac Center issued "the first of many advisory documents" to the state's Governor-elect. The

Mackinac Center expressed the opinions of the state's business community in a publication titled, *Road Map for a Michigan Renaissance.* It stated that Michigan's corporate elite expected nothing short of "revolutionary" change, a transformation that would "encourage private initiative and free markets and less government" (Reed 1990).

Lawrence W. Reed, Mackinac Center's founding president and President Emeritus of the Foundation for Economic Education, wrote the *Road Map*, which was labeled the Center's first "fiscal study." The document opened by describing Michigan as being a state on the brink of crisis, but also, potentially, a renaissance. "When the new Governor and legislature take office on January 1, they will inherit a teetering economy and a state government in fiscal crisis," he began. "At the same time, there exists a new potential for much-needed change, a window of opportunity through which they must aggressively navigate the state if a more prosperous Michigan is to be assumed" (Reed 1990). To effect a "renaissance" in Michigan, Reed laid out the business community's blueprint for change, a plan they hoped, the Governor-elect would follow. This *Road Map* included twenty steps, four of which dealt directly with education.

One of the recommendations called on the new Governor to adopt "schools of choice" policies in order to improve education in the state's urban areas, specifically in Detroit. And, as we will see, the very reform policies that the Mackinac Center recommended during the Fall of 1990 – policies that, at the time, were not on the agenda in either chambers of state legislature, nor a point of public discussion – would be drafted and enacted as law well before the end of Engler's first term as governor. Similarly, it is on this road map that we find the early origins a new *meaning* of "reform" emerging in Michigan. A meaning that will become hegemonic, demonstrating the effects of the discourse.

Before we continue to examine the “study” prepared by Reed – a representation of the white corporate community’s bold new vision of “reform” – we would do well to recall the insights of critical black sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman. “Only in the most idealist sense can language be considered neutral,” because when it is employed “in speech interaction,” either written or spoken, it becomes “social dialog…filled with content and meaning drawn from behavior or ideology.” In other words, “society…impregnate[s] its language with social meanings” . Of course, power is not distributed evenly in society, and therefore certain individuals, but specifically *institutions*, have more resources and therefore influence than others. This uneven distribution of power, which in the US has been stratified along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality since the nation’s founding, has meant that certain institutions and social classes have a greater ability to influence language than others.

The Mackinac Center’s 1990 *Road Map* continued laying out the corporate vision of “reform,” acknowledging that while “Engler has expressed support for at least a limited form of ‘schools of choice,’” “he should go further. Cities like Detroit would especially benefit from breaking down the district barriers between public schools and introducing a voucher plan and/or tuition tax credits incorporating private schools as well” (Reed 1990). Interestingly, Detroit is the only Michigan city Reed names in the entire “study.” Although he does not explain why Detroit should be the target of the “voucher plan and/or tuition tax credits,” what is clear is that Detroit should be the exclusive target of such a solution.

Similarly, in another recommendation in the same document, the Center expressed the need for the state to forge a new relationship with Detroit. This new relationship must bring together Detroit’s political leadership, and its private sector, in order to “reform its dilapidated educational system through choice and competition” (Reed 1990). The *Road Map* laid out by

Reed is a stunning foreshadow of what would unfold during Engler's first term, which resulted in much of the privatization outlined by the think tank he co-founded. Thus, we can date both the emergence of the education "reform" discourse and the rise of a new political economy, or "system," of public education in Detroit, to the business community's vision as discursively constructed by the Mackinac Center in November 1990, two months before Engler entered office.

This vision is notable for not only introducing the concept of school "choice" and "competition" to Michigan's public and political leaders, but also because it was specifically emphasized as a solution to Detroit's "dilapidated educational system." That "choice," "competition," and a new "relationship" with Detroit's leadership was necessary signals more than just a business vision, however. It is an implicitly a political vision, one which seeks to redefine the relationship of Detroiters to their democratically-governed school system and the role the market plays in mediating that relationship.

Claiming the title of Educational Governor while running for election in 1990, Engler was anxious to officially introduce Michigan's to his "radical" neoliberal ideas once elected. He would use the occasion of his Inaugural Address to do just this. After being sworn in as Michigan's 46th governor, Engler began his speech, expressing that the state was going to finally assume its "responsibility" of restoring and renewing the great state of Michigan. "As we look ahead to the new century and beyond," he said, "it is abundantly clear that Michigan's future greatness is directly linked to our ability to restore and renew the important and fundamental values, institutions, and resources that led to Michigan's greatness in the past. To begin," Engler continues, "we must restore the spirit of enterprise in Michigan," as it was "entrepreneurial genius that caused America to lead the Industrial Revolution." To revive Michigan's

entrepreneurial spirit, his administration would "restore the most fundamental principle of economic growth: a commitment to a true market-based economy" (Engler 1991).

If Michigan were to successfully compete, not only against "49 other states," but "most foreign countries," then serious education "reform" was necessary. "Future jobs will be created where employers find workers who meet the ever-higher standards made necessary by global competition. The skills needed to fill the jobs of tomorrow are no longer ones that can be learned in the family workshop. Nor can they be learned by those who attend inferior schools – or by those who do not graduate at all. For the children of Michigan to compete, we must revitalize our state's education system. The jobs of tomorrow demand it" (Engler 1991). Similar to the National Commission on Excellence in Education's 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk,* Engler was linking Michigan's future economic prosperity to the state's educational institutions. If the startling 1983 report produced by the US Dept. of Education was intended to serve as a wake-up call for Americans about the eroding "educational foundations of our society" and their threat to the nation's global "preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation" (The National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983), then Engler, in his Inaugural Address, was declaring that Michigan, similarly, was *a state at risk*.

Still, Engler had a solution, a "step in the right direction." The Governor then announced that the state would "pursue the promising agenda of choice in education." Positioning himself as a defender of parents and children – the *people* – Engler in his first public speech initiated a process of constructing and politicizing antagonizing identities, identities that would be useful for the impending "reform" revolution. "The decision to select one school or another for a child is best made by the child's parents – not by government officials." Instead, what the people needed was "choice." "Choice is fair; and I am convinced that it will restore a great Michigan

legacy: the finest schools in the nation" (Engler 1991). It was government, according to Engler's narrative, which stood in the way of "choice."

Alluding to school segregation and related racial and class inequality in the state, Engler offered "choice" as the answer to the chronic issue of school "failure." The public school system would not trap African American parents and students, enslaving them to the corrupt, or at least, self-interested, whims of government officials. They would no longer be trapped by "bureaucracy." On the contrary, his administration would empower them. "For the too large number of us who are disadvantaged, we will build an era of renewed hope and opportunity…Our message will be: We will not consign you or anyone else to hopeless oblivion. You, too, are stakeholder in the future of Michigan. Your future is our future. And you, too, will help us restore the greatness of our state" (Engler 1991). Reaching out directly to the "disadvantaged" and offering "choice" as the solution to the problem of school "failure," Engler's speech was detailing a logic and structure to the meaning of "reform" in Michigan.

The drive to privatize various aspects of state government began quickly under Engler. In July of 1992, the Governor established the Michigan Public-Private Partnership Commission (MPPPC) by Executive Order. It had two objectives. The Commission's first objective was to review a state report that was produced on public-private partnerships and, secondly, make recommendations to the Governor regarding which state assets or services, if any, should be privatized. The Commission was chaired by James Barrett, President and CEO of the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, one of Michigan's most powerful business organizations (Lovell 2017). The Commission released its final report in December 1992.

That report, entitled, *PERM: Privatize, Eliminate, Retain or Modify*, recommended that the government privatize hundreds of state-level functions. In fact, the corporate-produced

PERM report concluded that "significant privatization" had already "taken place in Michigan…However, much of this activity has occurred in isolation and sometimes without the benefit of a comprehensive look at the activity in relation to other activities" (MPPPC 1992, iii). Thus, they instructed the Governor that privatizations effort should "be broadened to encompass a comprehensive analysis of every activity or every program in State government," including public education (MPPPC 1992, iii). A small section in the report noted that government could award "certificates" or "vouchers" that would "empower private individuals to direct (within limits) the expenditure of government funds" (MPPPC 1992, 9). This small paragraph, as well as a few other related comments, reflects some of the early traces of direct corporate influence over the "reform" discourse, and demonstrates how the corporate discourse is moved into the realm of policy making.

Only a few weeks after the *PERM* report was released, the Mackinac Center published another "study," this time reviewing the Governor's performance midway through his first term. Appraising Engler's effectiveness in implementing the corporate agenda in Michigan, the Center provided him with an overall performance rating of an "A-" (Reed 1993b). Despite having a Governor whose "rhetoric matches his deeds,"[5] the Center urged the governor to "keep the Engler Revolution on track," because it remained "very much unfinished." The President of the Mackinac Center wrote, "our review of the Governor's second year is not uncritical. Even the best of records leaves room for improvement, if for no other reason than the blocking actions of the political opposition" (Reed 1993b). One of the critical "problems" identified by the

[5] The Center was expressed disdain for President George H.W. Bush in this article when it was written on January 1, 1993. Bush had just lost to William J. Clinton in the presidential election the preceding year, and the Center implied it was the consequence of Bush raising taxes in 1990, despite claiming he wouldn't in 1988.

corporate community, wrote Reed, was the lagging pace of school reform. "Schools-of-choice…went forward at a snail's pace" in 1992, he wrote. "For most districts, it was 'business as usual' in spite of a state mandate to broaden choice options" (Reed 1993b). Here, we are told by the Mackinac Center that there is a "mandate" for "reform." And to be clear, it's not just any mandate. It's a "mandate" for "schools-of choice." Again, the Center is consistent in defining "reform" as "choice," making the "mandate" one for institutional or "systemic" change. However, fortunately for the corporate cause, the Mackinac Center predicted less obstacles to the "reform" agenda, "given the change in the composition of the House of Representatives" in Michigan in 1993.

The Mackinac Center advised the Governor to use his "forthcoming State of the State message to articulate a bold, detailed, and integral vision for Michigan built around" seven themes: "citizen empowerment over growth of bureaucracy, choice over coercion, accountability over indifference, competition over monopoly, incentive over dependency, individual liberty over state dictates, and a strengthened role for the states over federal encroachment." (Reed 1993a). Interestingly, at least the first six of these themes directly correspond to features of the "reform" discourse as explored in the last chapter and they also demonstrate key representational practice that were preconditions for the state's eventual takeover of DPS in 1999. As Doty argues, discourse has a "dual nature" in that it "consists of the impossibility of ultimate closure and the fact of partial fixation or partial closure. It is this partial closure that creates 'reality,' the identities of subjects, and that fixes meaning so as to make certain practices seem logical, rational, and natural" (Doty 1996, 45). This "partial closure" is captured, in part, through the establishment of a logic of equivalence. Here we see a "chain of equivalences" created between *empowerment, choice, accountability, competition, incentive,* and *individual liberty*, on the one

hand, and *bureaucracy, coercion, indifference, monopoly,* and *dependency* on the other. All of these signifiers are used frequently among various school reformers, displaying a unifying logic across the "reform" discourse. Associative chains like this will play a central role in the construction of DPS as "failed."

The same day Mackinac Center published its January 1993 "study" giving Engler high marks, it also co-published another study with the Reason Foundation titled, *Designing a Comprehensive State-Level Privatization Program*. Written by William D. Eggers, the Director of the Reason Foundation's Privatization Center, and a policy analyst specializing in privatization at The Heritage Foundation, the study was a step-by-step, how-to guide, for state lawmakers, walking them through how to privatize various functions of state-government, including the public school system.

Privatization, which Eggers defined as the process of "injecting competition into service delivery and turning physical assets into financial assets" was rapidly becoming a key component of programs designed to "rightsize state governments" (Eggers 1993a). Eggers' study laid out nine steps policy makers could take to successfully privatize state assets. Privatizing government functions and assets – like public education and school buildings – the Reason Foundation-affiliate wrote, would help states address their "fiscal crises," noting that in the 1990s "'rightsizing,' or restructuring and reevaluating the nature, size, and mission of state and local government" was a "buzzword" among legislators across the nation (Eggers 1993b).

However, what was lacking in many states, and what Eggers was offering to Michigan's legislators in particular, was a "comprehensive approach" to "rightsizing" government. In this, Eggers was echoing the call of Engler's corporate produced *PERM* report, which had also called for a "comprehensive analysis of every activity or every program in State government" (MPPPC

1992). One solution to implementing a more comprehensive privatization program, Eggers contended, was the appointment of a privatization dictator, or what he called a, "privatization czar" (Eggers 1993c). Indeed, "experience in the United States and throughout the world has demonstrated the advantage of designating a single individual to oversee a government-wide privatization program. This individual, sometimes unofficially referred to as the 'privatization czar,' ensures that the privatization goals are systematically carried out. The privatization czar is also responsible for coordinating the privatization efforts of various state agencies and acting as executive liaison on privatization to the legislature" (Eggers 1993c). As will be shown in the final section below, this idea and formulation of a "privatization czar" as articulated by Eggers directly parallels the institutional design of the position of the Chief Executive Office which was created during the state's takeover of Detroit Public Schools (DPS) in 1999.

The Mackinac Center-Reason Foundation report pointed out that there were "hundreds" of opportunities across state government ripe for privatization. "Over 200 government functions could be privatized," Eggers wrote, referencing a recent report that the Michigan Department of Management and Budget developed (Eggers 1993d). The citing the Dept. of Management and Budget's report is an example of intertextualization, a practice whereby "people who participate in" important social discussions seek to "add value to their own argument by citing others' various discourses that support their own desired outcome" (Bell 2015, 130). By citing the Budget department's findings, the Mackinac Center and the Reason Foundation were positioning themselves as advocates of Engler's agenda and the corporate vision of school "reform" more broadly. Still, another question legislators were grappling with at the time was *how* to privatize these government functions. The Mackinac Center-Reason Foundation document had an answer to that in "Step 4: Identify Privatization Opportunities."

This step not only helped legislators identify areas of government that could be privatized, but as Figure 1 illustrates below, it provided them with options as to how to do so. “Options for state governments range from contracting out the provision of government support services such as data processing, auditing, and printing, to selling off government assets such as airports, buildings and all turnpikes; though it would be unrealistic to attempt to privatize all such functions at once” (Eggers 1993d). Figure 1 shows that this first option, “contracting out the provision of government support services,” was a central recommendation for one “government function”: K-12 education (Eggers 1993d). As that figure shows, every major function of schools could be administered by “contract” or “management contract” exclusively. Schools and school districts could not only be run by contract, they could also be administered through “public-private partnerships.” This point is true for school’s “physical infrastructure” and “educational infrastructure” as well. Once again, vouchers are another market-based school “reform” advocated by the corporate community. The pursuit of a “comprehensive” privatization scheme of education, specifically the creation of a charter school market, would unwittingly receive a significant boost several months after the Mackinac Center-Reason publication.

Table 2

STATE PRIVATIZATION OPPORTUNITES							
Government Function	Privatization Techniques						
	Build-Operate-Transfer	Contract/ Management Contract	Public-private partnerships	Sale/ Lease	Service Shedding	Volunteers	Vouchers
Administrative and General Support Service							
Accounting		✗					
Auditing		✗					
Building Construction		✗					
Computer Maintenance		✗					
Computer Systems Design		✗					
Data Processing		✗					
Engineering Services		✗					
Facility Management		✗					
Museums		✗					
Real Estate/Buildings/Facilities		✗		✗			
Pest Control		✗		✗			
Printing		✗					
Security		✗		✗	✗		
Telecommunications		✗					
Trash Removal		✗					
Corrections							
New Facilities	✗						
Existing Facilities		✗		✗			
Health Care		✗					
Mental Health Services		✗					
Food Services		✗					
Educational instruction		✗				✗	
Transportation		✗					
Surplus Prison Property			✗	✗			
Jail Inspections		✗					
Education							
Generalized Instruction		✗					✗
Schools		✗	✗				
School Districts		✗	✗				
Bus Transportation		✗					
Custodial Services		✗					
Food Services		✗					
Specialized Instruction		✗					✗
Drop-out Education		✗					✗
Physical Infrastructure		✗	✗				
Educational Infrastructure		✗	✗				

State Privatization Programs

Figure 1. Sample of State Privatization Opportunities Identified by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in 1993

“THE SYSTEM’S BROKEN!”: “REFORM” AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW MARKET

> [T]he Democratic caucus in the Senate met and agreed to have Debbie Stabenow sponsor an amendment to Senate Bill 1. Stabenow was given the go-ahead because she was running for governor. The amendment called for breathtakingly bold action: *eliminating the property taxes that paid for public schools*. Engler conferred with Democratic Minority Leader Art Miller and immediately sensed that the Democrats were bluffing…Democrats just wanted to embarrass Republicans going into the 1994 elections. It was a crucial electoral year because the governor, 38 senators, and 110 representatives were up for re-election. By having Republican lawmakers vote against SB1, Democrats could truthfully say that Republicans were not really serious about cutting property taxes. This would keep the GOP on the defensive. Engler decided to call the Democrats’ bluff (Whitney 2002, 223).

Michigan’s school finance system had been a point of contention for some time. As Addonizio and Kearney (2014, 15) note, between 1972 and 1989 the state’s citizens voted nine times to reduce their property taxes and transform the ways schools were funded. These attempts – some statutory others constitutional – had all failed. Discontent over school financing was particularly acute in Michigan cities like Detroit, where tax proposals for school funding had long served as an issue of intense racial conflict, leading to a series of financial crises during the 1970s.

As educational historian Jeffrey Mirel observes, battles over school funding in Detroit intensified the anger of the city’s white population. “By 1973, the inchoate political sentiments of many white Detroiters began to form into a clear philosophy that identified many of America’s ills with the incursion of liberal government into the lives of ordinary citizens. Busing was the catalyst for that belief.” However, “as Nixon aide Leonard Garmet noted at the time, ‘Busing goes beyond schools and segregation – to all those other areas where people feel threated in seniority, prestige, identity and begin to ask what are those bastards doing to us?’ Opposition to taxes, particularly school taxes, became equally potent aspect of that philosophy”

(Mirel 1999, 352). This struggle over school finance continued into the 1990s, where its "reformers were now batting a pathetic 0 of 12" (Addonizio and Kearney 2014, 16)

It was Debbie Stabenow, Michigan's then State Senator, and her fellow party members, according to Engler's speech writer who is quoted in the opening epigraph of this section, that are responsible for the "breakthrough" in the school financing impasse. That breakthrough occurred one evening at the end of July and offered Engler an incredible opportunity given his failure to deliver on a key campaign pledge. "He had campaigned for governor on the promise of a 20 percent cut in property taxes," Whitney wrote, "but had not been able to deliver." Frankly, Engler "needed some stroke of luck, some major policy success, some major mistake on the part of Democrats to put him on a smooth guide to re-election in November of 1994. To his incredible fortune, the Democrats obliged" (Whitney 2002, 219).

In response to a Republican proposal to cut property taxes, Stabenow, offered a "radical" plan to eliminate property taxes altogether as the source of school funding. While Gleaves Whitney, Engler's chief speechwriter and historian, and Engler himself claimed she was "bluffing," Stabenow went on record defending her action, telling a reporter that "property taxes were too high and we had to replace the revenue…So I put this out there thinking it might set a deadline" (Whitney 2002, 225). Whatever the strategy, it was this action that created the conditions for the emergence of a charter school market. Immediately Republicans in both houses of state legislature voted in favor of the bill, passing legislation that "cut property taxes by about $5.6 billion, or roughly two-thirds of all property taxes levied annually" forcing lawmakers to "rebuild Michigan's school finance system" (Whitney 2002, 226).

I want to emphasize this moment to also point out that discourses, like history, are contingent. They are not predetermined. Similarly, while it is true that racial capitalists have

power, it is also true that they must operate under definite historical conditions. In the context of Michigan, this means any analysis of the emergence of the charter school market and school takeovers more generally cannot be explained as solely the effort of a Governor or corporate interests alone. There are various factors which have helped advance and stifle the "reform" apparatus in Michigan, with particular consequences for DPS. Stabenow's actions made it possible not only for the charter school market to emerge in Michigan, but also a restructuring of the state's school system more broadly, although it's highly doubtful this was her intention. Thus, the passage of SB1 is just one of numerous moments that allowed the "reform" apparatus to grow *independently* of the intentions of racial capitalists. This point is crucial to demonstrate that while racial capitalists, are indeed powerful – they have significant control and influence over resources, and consequently the construction of knowledge and reality – they are nevertheless confined by certain institutional and historical constraints. In other words, they are not all powerful.

After the passage of SB1, Engler quickly convened a team of finance "experts" and school "reformers." In August, Whitney, who was a key part of the team recalls, "I was communicating with the nation's leading education thinkers and writers, gathering ideas: Grover Norquist (Americans for Tax Reform), Checker Finn and Diane Ravitch (Educational Excellence Network), John Fund (Wall Street Journal), Stephen Moore and David Boaz (Cato Institute), Peter Brimelow and Leslie Spencer (*Forbes* magazine)." In Engler, they "saw…the governor, and in Michigan the opportunity, to blaze a new trail in education reform" (Whitney 2002, 231). Additionally, Whitney notes that he "kept a number of our allies in the education-reform and think-tank community appraised. I drew on the expertise of Russell Kirk, Annette Kirk, Larry Reed, Paul DeWeese" – all affiliated with the Mackinac Center, and many others. "All of them

grasped the significance of the moment and recognized that far-reaching reforms were finally possible" (Whitney 2002, 231). The "A-Team," as they were known, was set, and their market-driven vision of "reform" would be shared with the public the following month.

Discourse, Charter Schools, the Origins of Racial Dispossession

On October 5, 1993, Engler gave what Reed (who also helped Engler draft the speech) called, "the greatest education speech" he had ever heard (Whitney 2002, 233). Entitled *Our Kids Deserve Better! New Schools for a New Century,* the speech, which Engler delivered to a joint session of the state legislature, was the governor's first to exclusively address the issue of education "reform." It would serve as one of the Governor's "most important" and "most impassioned" speeches of his tenure (Whitney 2002).

After acknowledging members of the legislature, Engler began by describing his objective in that moment: to "outline a far-reaching plan of innovation and reform – a plan that will deliver new schools for a new century" (Engler 1993). But, he stated, "before we look to the future, I'd like to take you into the past and recall words spoken in this very chamber, from this very podium":

> "In my special message to the Legislature on Education ... I outlined the major problems facing Michigan because of the inadequate, inequitable, and antiquated structure we have for operating and financing our schools. I said that collectively these problems add up to an educational crisis in Michigan, and that if we failed to move toward educational reform intelligently in the very near future, the crisis would become an educational disaster (Engler 1993).

"Those words," Gov. Engler told the legislators, "are from another era. The time: October 9th, 1969 – 24 years ago this week. The mission: to improve our public schools. The speaker: Governor Bill Milliken." Thus, the Governor concluded, "ideas and sentiments are 24 years old," but the question facing everyone present was: Will they let another generation of children go by

without acting? “Will we act in time for them?” the Governor asked. “We’d better – and soon! Because our kids deserve better!” Therefore, Engler would proceed to outline a plan for “real change.” His purpose was “not to point fingers,” but “simply to show the magnitude of the challenge” (Engler 1993).

Drawing on statistics from “Professor Harold Stevenson at the University of Michigan,” Engler told the audience that on “tests given to students from twenty countries, American eighth graders ranked tenth in arithmetic, twelfth in algebra, and sixteenth in geometry. Twelfth grade students fared just as badly” (Engler 1993). Then Engler announced that Michigan’s Department of Education would be releasing a report on the state’s “progress toward meeting the national education goals. Frankly,” he said, “the report is not flattering. Data show that over the past few years:

> * Our high school graduation rate has been barely above 70 percent.
> * Only one in five 10th graders has been passing our statewide mathematics test.
> * Only two in five have been passing our statewide reading and science tests.
> * Last year, there were 15 school districts where more than 75 percent of the incoming seniors could not pass a 10th grade test and earn a state-endorsed diploma.
> * And in 253 districts, more than half of the incoming seniors could not pass the 10th grade test and earn a state-endorsed diploma.
> * Despite investing billions of dollars on K through 12 education over the past decade – despite many reform efforts – SAT scores have remained virtually flat (Engler 1993).

“Ladies and gentlemen, that’s not good enough. Not good enough for our kids, our economy, our future. We can do better! We must do better! And do better now!” (Engler 1993).

Despite having many public education “success stories,” there were “far too many failures.” The Governor acknowledged that in his travels across the state, he encounters many people who say: “My school is fine; it’s others that are the problem.” And, Engler acknowledged, “Maybe that’s true – there are many good schools. But,” he went on to say, “everyone knows a school that’s not very good. Maybe your children don’t go there – but

someone's children do, and they are Michigan children." Then, if that altruistic argument didn't resonate, it seems Engler felt compelled to offer a slightly more self-interested, economic rationale for "reform": "And they are children who will enter our economy and in turn have kids of their own. We have to reach them and help them." The consequences of not doing so, not offering a "helping" hand to those children who are "failures" could be catastrophic. "When these children fail, we all fail. Their failure will haunt us for years – in our jails, in our prisons, in welfare lines, in unemployment lines" (Engler 1993)

This passage is extremely significant and reveals several representational practices that are used to construct urban schools, but specifically DPS and their young people as "failed," justifying a rational, logical, and even humanitarian intervention by the state in the name of "reform." First, as the opening salvo in the battle for education "reform," Engler's speech does more than simply "outline a far-reaching plan." In fact, it is implicated in the production of knowledge and the sociolinguistic construction of objects, the discursive manufacturing of *things*. For example, the Governor acknowledges that his call to transform public education may be concerning to some, particularly those who believe that their public school or district is "fine." Recognizing this, Engler, here, tries to assuage those concerns. By acknowledging those "success stories," validating those who believe that their public schools are "fine," Engler positively reinforces these beliefs, solidifying, for some, their vision of a "successful" public school system. However, by juxtaposing the "fact" (which apparently "everyone knows") that far too many schools "fail," Engler constructs an image of a bifurcated public school system; a system that is "successful" in some places and a "failure" in others. This move is useful, and extremely productive for the "reform" apparatus, as it allows the discourse to critique and, at times even assail, the public school "system," while allowing leeway as to how that system is

defined. It's a discourse that makes the school "system" a malleable object, one which can be constructed and contorted – but especially dichotomized – in ways that are productive for the apparatus. The "system is broken!" Just, of course, not for everyone.

Second, though relatedly, this passage of Engler's speech not only constructs objects (i.e. "failed" schools), but identities as well. Note that Engler refers to children as "failures," presenting them as "hopeless" and in dire need of saving. "We have to reach them and help them," he states, because "when these children fail" it is "their failure" that will haunt us in jails, prisons, welfare lines, and unemployment (Engler 1993). In a sly move, the Governor not only constructs objects and identities in his speech, but he links them as well. "Failed" schools produce student who are "failures," "failures" who in turn threaten the rest of us. Of course, the opposite is true as well: "successful" schools produce "successful" students, and successful students positively contribute to society.

In connecting the young people he calls "failures" to crime, welfare and unemployment, the Governor was also connecting the education "reform" discourse to discourses developed out of the white "backlash" to the successes of the Black Freedom Struggle. In other words, linking "reform" to the representations of the "underclass," Engler further racialized the issue of "reform" using key signifiers associated with the discourse of the "New Right" (Lowndes 2008). Massey and Denton discuss the origins of the "underclass" label as a response to the successes of the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s:

> While public discourse on race and poverty became more acrimonious and more focused on divisive issues such as school busing, racial quotas, welfare, and affirmative action, conditions in the nation's ghetto deteriorated. By the end of the 1970s, the image of poor minority families mired in an endless cycle of unemployment, unwed childbearing, illiteracy, and dependency had coalesced into a compelling and powerful concept: the urban underclass. In the view of many middle-class whites, inner cities had come to house a large population of poorly educated single mothers and jobless men – mostly black and Puerto Rican

> – who were unlikely to exit poverty and become self-sufficient. In the ensuing national debate on the causes of this persistent poverty, four theoretical explanations gradually emerged: culture, racism, economics, and welfare (Massey and Denton 1993, 5).

Engler's characterization of urban students as "failures" aligned directly with this "underclass" concept, a further example of the racialization of "reform," placing it squarely in the realm of racial politics.

After citing a litany of statewide statistics on school "failure," and constructing schools and peoples as "successes" and "failures," Engler was finally ready to articulate a vision of education "reform," the centerpiece of which was "empowering" youth and families. "Youth empowerment" demanded that the state raise expectations by setting "high standards – world-class standards," so that Michigan's future workforce would be world-class and contribute productively to the state's economy. "Youth empowerment," however, meant "one more thing." In addition to learning core academic skills, Engler's "reform" plan called for transforming children's "character." For those young "failures" across the state, the "aim of education must not only make" these "kids smarter, but *better*" (Engler 1993). In other words, it was only by instilling in students "respect" for "property" and "authority" and other "civic virtues" that the state's "young people take their rightful place in our self-governing republic" (Engler 1993). These characteristics must be instilled through education "reform," not only for the safety and prosperity of all, but apparently because the educational "failure" of Black youth threatened their very status as citizens in the Republic!

> We must empower our families – empower them with more choice…the freedom to send their kids to the school they think is best…freedom to choose is why this nation was founded. Our political system, our economic system, our whole society are built upon this fundamental right (Engler 1993).

Engler's "reform" plan would "empower" young people and families by doing three things: creating choice, charter schools, and introducing a "foundation grant." While the state had yet to identify a new revenue stream to fund public education after they abolished the use of local property taxes, Engler proposed developing a foundation grant – a fixed amount of money per student per district that would then follow that students wherever they went. This grant would play a key role in facilitating the other two major components of Engler's "reform" plan. Creating a funding system where grants followed students afforded the Governor a prime opportunity to introduce charter school legislation first described and advocated by the neo-liberal think-tank – The Mackinac Center – days after Engler's election in 1990. Now, not only could the Governor advocate for charter schools, but given that local districts no longer controlled school funds, he could propose far-reaching legislation to transform the state's entire public school system by introducing a market-based "reform." Additionally, his plan meant that there was now millions of dollars in incentives to establish a charter school market. Proposing a minimum foundation grant of $4,500 per student, Engler sparked the interest of educational entrepreneurs and other racial capitalists who realized these changes granted them access to public money which was not currently available. Engler, in other words, was announcing the creation of a new market. This was the corporate, neoliberal vision being infused into public policy decisions and directing where and how public money is spent.

Charter schools were a key part of Engler's vision of "choice," although it did not exhaust it. "Choice," specifically charter schools, would be the solution to an inflexible system, a public "monopoly" on the service of education.

> Public education is a monopoly, and monopolies don't work. Why? Because in a monopoly, customers don't come first. We've all heard the stories. About the mom in Detroit who broke the law and was sentenced to probation. Her crime? Sending her daughter to a higher-quality school in the suburbs where she didn't

> live…[P]arents and children deserve a more flexible system, a system with schools that respond more to the educational needs of the family than to the bottom line of the system!...To assure an array of public school choices for families – and empower them as never before – we will encourage new and innovative schools to be started. These schools without boundaries are known as 'charter public schools' (Engler 1993).

Again, Engler explicitly invokes Detroit and "crime" in the discourse of "reform." Even though this invocation of "probation" is used to demonstrate the lack of "flexibility" in the school "system," it nevertheless reinforces the link between educational "failure" and Black criminality. This construction is useful, furthermore, because it is through "reform" that Engler, and legislators, can once again rescue those who have no other option, either by choice or circumstance, to commit crime.

The last part of Engler's vision of choice, facilitated by the change in school financing, was what would come to be called "inter-district choice." No longer, Engler claimed, would parents be forced to attend the schools in their neighborhood or district. As part of the "reform" package, "inter-district choice" would provide students with more educational "choice" in terms of the school they attended. Borrowing from the lexicon of the Cold War, Engler declared, "Let's tear down the Berlin Wall of separation that has held kids hostage to one school district. It is time to tear down the wall! Our families want their freedom! And they want it now!" (Engler 1993).

Still, it seemed to be a selective demolition of the wall. As Engler went on to clarify, "the local school district will no longer have the right to compel your children to attend only those schools in the district." However, there was an important caveat. "[N]o school district will be required to admit students who live outside its boundaries. Those districts that want to keep things just as they are and remain closed will have that right" (Engler 1993). So, in other words, tear down that wall! (Unless you don't want to). At any rate, the "reforms" offered that October

afternoon, Engler assured legislators, would guarantee "quality, performance, accountability" in public education. "[T]hese will be the prized attributes of successful schools" (Engler 1993).

Reflecting on the speech, Whitney recalled that "at one point, when the governor was criticizing" the teachers unions, "and its allies for putting up a Berlin Wall around our children, Larry," the Mackinac Center President, grabbed his arm noting that "tears were in his eyes" (Whitney 2002, 233). The Center and its corporate constituency must have been elated when, in December, the legislature pushed through a host of "reform" bills recommended by Engler, including the Public Act 362, Michigan's first charter school law. In March 1994, Michigan voters approved Proposal A, the foundation grant school financing system proposed by Engler, which would, among other things, increase the state's sales tax from four cents to six cents, finally replacing the school revenue abolished by the Stabenow bill.

The Director of the Office of Revenue and Tax Analysis in Michigan's Treasury Department, who had worked for several governors, observed that, the "remarkable thing about Proposal A is how Engler managed to pull together so much. It started out as a bill to replace school funding. But Engler seized the opportunity to make it so much more – an opportunity to improve public education, increase accountability, help teachers develop professionally, start charter schools, and much else. That's leadership" (Whitney 2002, 231). At the time of its passage, Michigan became the eight state in the nation to adopt a charter school law (Arsen and Ni 2012, 8). Under the law, charter schools, or public school academies (PSA), would receive state funding via the students who attended the schools, although they would operate independently of normal state guidelines and control. Charter schools are established and governed by a charter issued by an authorized body. According to the charter school law in Michigan, the entities or authorized bodies that can issue charters are school districts, the state

board of education, intermediate school districts, or a public community college or university. The first charter school appeared in Michigan in 1994 (Izraeli and Murphy 2012, 236).

When the law was passed there was no limit to the number of charters that could be issued, however, this changed after some authorizers, like Central Michigan University, issued a significant amount of charters (31) in just two years (Arsen and Ni 2012, 8; Seymour 1996, 1)[6]. According to "choice" advocates, in order for charter schools to recruit students and receive public funding they must provide educational opportunities that are superior or competitive with those "products" offered in the traditional public school system or they will close. Of course, on the other hand, this forces traditional public schools to improve their educational outcomes – "compete" – or lose students. Either way, Engler and other supporters claim, the introduction of charter schools provide students with greater educational "choice."

Throughout 1994, the Governor and the Mackinac Center worked to expand the charter school market. One avenue they used to pursue that agenda was through the TEACH Michigan Education Fund. TEACH, founded by Paul DeWeese, a Republican and former state representative, was already involved in the early days of Michigan's charter school movement. In fact, according to, TEACH "was instrumental in promoting (indeed, authoring) the original charter school legislation," and has received financial support from major corporations and the state's wealthiest families (Lubienski 2003, 485). He further explains their actions:

> Along with the Chamber of Commerce, TEACH Michigan formed the Michigan Center for Charter Schools to promote and provide resources for these schools. TEACH Michigan has or had ties to the Mackinac Center, Edison Schools, Inc., and religious conservatives advocating public funding for faith-based organizations. Members publish op-ed columns attacking "government schools" – for example, one board member and charter operator wants to "blow up the existing system". TEACH Michigan has made clear that its support for school choice goes well beyond charter schools—the organization sees charters only as a

[6] State legislature passed a cap on charters, limiting the number of charter schools to 85 in 1996, 100 in 1997, and 150 in 2000 (Seymour 1996, 1).

stepping stone to a more "radical" version of a pure, free-market model" (Lubienski 2001).

Additionally, the Michigan Partnership for New Education (MPNE), a state-led school "reform" partnership between Michigan State University and the State of Michigan had been in operation since 1989 was slowly transforming under Engler as well. This Partnership, which included public schools, businesses, local governments, and community organizations, functioned as a network of individuals all concerned with improving the educational performance of Michigan's children. Originally the Partnership's approach had centered around one major innovation: Professional Development Schools (PDS). "In these schools, faculty members and their public-school colleagues conduct research, team-teach classes, devise ways of improving the school's curriculum and instruction, and work with M.S.U. students who are preparing to teach" (Bradley 1990). However, the MPNE which, in 1990, represented the largest public-private educational partnership in the US, began to shift its focus once Engler was elected. The new Governor would replace several key leaders in the MPNE, and by the end of 1994 the organization was focusing less on PDS and more on implementing and fostering charter school development. The organization also expressed that they were seeking "funds that could go to Detroit or other metropolitan areas in the state under the philanthropist Walter H. Annenberg's education-reform initiative" (Richardson 1994). They would be significantly aided in that pursuit with the return of Bill Beckham Jr. to Detroit.

SCHOOL REFORM IN BLACKFACE?: NEW DETROIT, BILL BECKHAM AND THE BLACK URBAN REGIME

New Detroit, established in 1967, was the "most significant response" by racial capitalists in the region to the Black rebellion that had erupted in the city that summer (Darden and Thomas 2013, 11). Created at the urging of Michigan's then Governor George Romney and Mayor

Cavanagh, New Detroit originally comprised a coalition of 160 community leaders (Fine 2007, 320). This public-private partnership, which was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1968, had as its stated goal at the time "to serve as a forum in which community and economic leaders could come together to develop practical solutions for the problems facing the city and the region" (Hula and Jackson-Elmoore 2001, 325-326). Its 1968 annual report frames the city's problems in political and social terms:

> What we have come to call the urban crisis is, at its core, a crisis of people and their concern for each other. At its heart, the problem is not how to mobilize a city, a county, a state or a nation into action, although mobilization is needed. It is, instead, a struggle to change attitudes and mobilize millions of individuals consciences into responding to their fellow human beings in practical material ways (Hula and Jackson-Elmoore 2001, 326).

By bringing together a coalition of businessmen and community leaders, New Detroit intended to improve interracial relations and assuage the conditions that led to the 1967 conflict (Boyd 2017).

Despite playing various roles over the years, by the early to mid-1990s, New Detroit had become largely ineffective, and the organization was on the verge of extinction. It would, however, be re-energized by two developments in 1996: the return of Bill Beckham, Jr. to Detroit, and the expanding reform apparatus across the state (Beckham 1999, 4). Beckham, who has served as the Chief of Staff for Detroit's Mayor Coleman A. Young early in his first tenure, was later plucked away to work for President Jimmy Carter's administration. Subsequently, Beckham worked for years as a corporate executive in the private sector (Beckham 1999). He would be lured back to his hometown, however, in the mid 1990s by New Detroit's leadership who contacted him about taking over the organization and redefining its mission (Eversley 1996).

Seen as a “coalition builder” and a “transformational leader,” Beckham was tapped to lead the fledgling New Detroit in 1996 (Barkholz 2000). During an interview during the Fall of 1999, Beckham spoke about taking the reins of New Detroit. “I did New Detroit; I didn’t want to but I talked to a lot of the corporate people in the community, and New Detroit was in dire straits back then, whether it was even going to be around, with the community and all” (Beckham 1999). Yet, despite being in “dire straits,” the corporate community felt “that it need to be around, and that it needed a certain type of leadership. Well, I decided I would do it, and people convinced me to do it, because of my unique experience in both the public sector and the private sector. I mean, I had a pretty broad view and understanding of the issues, community, etc.” (Beckham 1999). After heeding the corporate community’s request to lead the fledgling organization, Beckham recalls how he first became interested in education “reform” in Detroit:

> I came back to Detroit started looking around, I mean you notice everything, what is just to me a criminal act being imposed upon these children, in terms of what is not being done. And I saw a system and a city that wasn’t preparing their young people…I went around speaking with these kids, and these are good kids, and yet the system was killing them. And it just made me want to get involved and change this system that’s really not working. So it just hit me that this is not right, so I volunteered to help the board get organized, at least from the business side. I mean, the corporate community had written the system off because they were tired of it (Beckham 1999).

Here, in response to the question of how he became involved with education in Detroit, Beckham responds by explaining to the interviewer that after returning to Detroit, he realized the “system” was “killing” the young people in the City. It was, he said, a “criminal” act. As a result, he “volunteered” to help the DPS board “get organized, at least from the business side.” Now, based on the available data one cannot contest the seemingly benevolent origins of Beckham’s interest in school “reform” in Detroit. Still, as will be shown below, this immediate interest in “reform”

aligned perfectly with Engler's agenda, namely the pursuit of an Annenberg Challenge grant (Bradley 1990).

At any rate, Beckham's emphasis on the "system" once again corresponds to theory informing the "reform" discourse; the "system" is broken, and the young people deserve better. And, similar to the Governor and *A New Framework*, Beckham also invokes criminality in the context of "reform." Beckham, furthermore, because of his corporate background is apparently uniquely qualified to play a role in the "reform" of DPS, getting their "business side" in order.

In the interview, Beckham also clarifies for the questioner what school "reform" actually means:

> The word reform in Detroit and other places takes on all types of political meanings too quickly. I almost hate to use it because people use it too any different ways…Reform is something other than what people make it; it's not moving boxes around, it's not getting the books to the classroom on time, it's not painting the walls. Those are means to an end. Reform to me is an addressing of behavior and attitude. It's a question of getting people who have responsibilities to look at what they do and be willing to change their behaviors, and be willing to change their behaviors in order to address the reality of the situation" (Beckham 1999).

"Behavior" and "attitude" are seen to be key aspects of "reform," which Beckham goes on to link to "achievement." Once again, these issue of cultural "failure" – having behaviors and attitudes that don't comport with "success" – is posited as the basis for needed "reform." And, during this same interview, Beckham raised another issue, asking rhetorically, "Where's the accountability" in DPS? "The real focus and purpose of reform is that our students can achieve at respectable, comparable, and competitive levels. And the expectations need to be high. What this does is dictates standards for behavior and performance" (Beckham 1999). Amazingly, Beckham, who has absolutely no background as an educator, confidently and boldly asserts what is needed to secure "high achievement."

On October 24, 1996, the Schools of the 21st Century Corp. was awarded a $20 million grant from the Annenberg Challenge, a national competition established by educational philanthropist Walter H. Annenberg. This new nonprofit corporation claimed the grant, which was matched by another $40 million from public and foundation sources[7], would "boost student achievement by focusing on the individual students and by engaging the community to develop local programs to help young people meet the challenges of the 21st century" (21st Century Schools 1998). Under this public-private partnership, a plan was designed to create school clusters – comprised of at least three schools – that would then be responsible for submitting "improvement plans." These plans would focus on three areas, or, "relationships": "relationships between teacher and student; the relationship between school staff and community members, including parents; and the relationship between schools and school district administration" (Eversley and Juarez Robles 1996).

This new nonprofit corporation, led by Beckham, was governed by a sixteen member board that was responsible for overseeing and evaluating the program.[8] The objective of the Schools for the 21st Century Initiative, according to Beckham who served as chair and spokesman for the coalition, was "to achieve system-wide reform. The initiative's mission is to put in place changes and improvements at the local school level that will ensure high levels of student performance throughout the entire system. It's designed to directly impact and improve student performance in the classroom" (M. E. Williams 1996).

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[7] These foundations include the Skillman Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Funding would also come from federal Title 1 funding and Michigan Section 31(a) funding, both of which are funds earmarked for "at-risk" and "disadvantaged" children (Eversley and Juarez Robles 1996)

[8] There would also be a group of fifteen academics and professionals known as the Leadership Council that would advise, help implement, and handle technical assistance for the Schools of the 21st Century board.

During the end of that same year, Irma Clark, president of the DPS board, and Beckham agreed to allow his organization to initiate an audit of the district. It seems Clark may have reached out to New Detroit in this effort after the state of Michigan withheld bond money from the district because of questions regarding a separate bond initiative in 1986. Despite objections from her fellow board members, the audit went forward, ultimately yielding negative results and as a consequence, generating greater support for "reforming" the district.

THE TAKEOVER DISCOURSE BEGINS

Since *A Nation at Risk*, Michigan's governors have dedicated more of their State of the State addresses to educational policy (Mehta 2013, 303–4). Similar to the President's State of the Union Address, the State of the State is a crucial opportunity for a governor to outline their priorities and layout their vision for the state's future. As one scholar of state politics in the US writes, these addresses are "the highest profile event of the year for the chief executives who get a chance to speak to both chambers of their state's legislature. The event takes place at the outset of the legislative sessions in all states…The process of drafting the speech starts weeks in advance and focuses on major items due to time limitations on the length of the speech" (Ivonchyk 2020, 498). Thus, the content of the Address not only signals Governors' most serious policy commitments, but it is a vital tool used to achieve those very goals. The significance of the Address proves that "governors indeed are influential players in state policy making" (Ivonchyk 2020, 515). Of course, the Address not only details the governor's "major priorities" to other legislators and state agencies, but as a televised event, it allows the state's leader to directly speak to the broader public and articulate their *vision*, unfiltered to the state's polity. In all these senses, this Address is another powerful discursive tool (National Governors Association 2018, 61).

Overall, during his tenure as Michigan's governor, Engler devoted 20.4% of his State of the State addresses to education, more than any of the state's other governors between 1973 and 2005 (Mehta 2013, 304). And on January 28, 1997, Gov. Engler would devote an entire section of his State of the State address to education "reform." In his Address titled, *Our Families, Our Future,* Engler announced that education "reform" would continue being a top priority of his administration. "I stand here tonight at the midpoint of my term, proud of what we have accomplished, optimistic about what we will do together," said Engler. But while "state after state" was copying Michigan by "reforming school funding," the Governor made clear that there was more work to be done. "Over the past six years, we have taken many steps that are making a difference for Michigan's families" (Engler 1997). Going on to describe Michigan as "better than ever," the governor then shifted, detailing one of the state's biggest problems.

> My fellow citizens, nothing is more important to the future of families than the quality of our children's education. Education is the ladder from poverty to prosperity. Education make equal opportunity possible. Education is the key to the American dream. And it is the lack of education, or poor quality education, that too often makes welfare and prisons necessary… We know firsthand that some of our public schools and many of our teachers are the very best in the world. But we also know that too many schools are failing our children…In particular, less than one-third of African-American families give their local schools high marks…[W]e also know that money alone does not raise student performance…that the performance gap between urban and non-urban districts is intolerable (Engler 1997).

In the governor's highest profile event of the year, he declared education the single most important issue for the future prosperity of Michigan's families. Education is represented by Engler as the path to the American dream, while a "lack" or "poor quality" education leads one down an unpleasant road to welfare and incarceration. Education can even help foster equal opportunity, no doubt contributing to racial equality[9]. Creating a binary of "good" and "bad"

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[9] Note that many conservatives, and whites, generally express a commitment to equal opportunity and not equal outcome. For this group, equal opportunity is the goal, and it is believed that better outcomes for Blacks will occur

education, where the former generates family and state prosperity, while the latter leads to prison and welfare, not only draining state resources but a catalyst for numerous Black cultural deficiencies. While the state can and should celebrate its world-class schools, it must also recognize the "failing" schools within its borders, the latter primarily attended by Black families. More than racializing school failure by implying that poor educational performance was a distinct phenomenon confined to Black schools, Engler worked to spatialize this failure as well. Thus, it was not the "urban," not the "non-urban" schools, whose failure was now "intolerable."

The program to "reform" Black educational "failure" as constructed by elites, was three pronged. First, charter school growth needed to be expanded and encouraged, which also required rethinking the very idea and meaning of public education, given that many charters would receive public money yet be operated by private corporations or nonprofit organizations and not held to the same regulations as traditional public schools.

> It is important for you to know where I stand as governor. I am for public education…Being for public education means giving our 1.6 million students and their parents and teachers more quality school choices…Being for public education means backing President Clinton's call for more charter schools…Being for public education means holding schools accountable (Engler 1997).

Better schools and school quality, here, requires increasing the number of charter schools in Michigan. Engler uses President Bill Clinton's promotion of charter schools at the federal level to locate his solution within leading national trends in school "reform," suggesting it is a bi-partisan solution, one that is, in other words, apolitical. In addition to charter schools, Engler also emphasized "accountability," another major theme of education "reform" that was gaining national moment. "Accountability" here signals a need for increased testing of students and

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by removing formal barriers to opportunity, i.e. segregation or poor education. This distinction is important because a dedication to equal opportunity means little concern with outcomes. Thus, actual racial inequality is acceptable to this group as long as there are no formal, observable barriers to opportunity.

rigorous assessments of teachers. Holding teachers "accountable," "to parents, to employers and to taxpayers," means rewarding teacher "success" and punishing teacher "failure."

Although accountability and charter schools may be considered, on their face, general reform policies, Engler's third solution to the problem that threatened future state prosperity- urban Black school failure, was takeover. I quote at length in order to sufficiently capture Engler's justification for state intervention and the abolition of local democratic rule over Detroit Public Schools and other majority-Black school districts in Michigan.

> "If I told you that…95% of the 11th-graders in our largest school district failed their science test, you would say: 'That's an outrage – something must be done.' I agree. We must act to help the children in Benton Harbor, in Detroit and in other failing school districts…My friends, how in good conscience can we look the other way when thousands of children trapped in failing public schools have no other choice and no other chance?...We have no choice. We must change the system!...I propose the School District Accountability Act to…allow state intervention in any school district if either of the following minimal standards is not met: first, when more than 80 percent of the students fail the state proficiency test; second, when the dropout rate is higher than 25 percent. In addition, I support the State Board of Education to establish other criteria that would allow for state intervention. I realize that some will recoil at the thought of state intervention. They will argue that local control means they should be in charge. As I said earlier, I defend local control, but I cannot defend failure…[W]e cannot sit by and ignore the problems in the name of local control (Engler 1997).

According to Engler, the outrageous levels of failure in Detroit and Benton Harbor, (another one of the state's majority Black-school districts) evidenced by their test scores and dropout rates, requires that the State of Michigan intervene and take control of those districts. Despite the tradition of local control of schools, which has long informed educational governance in Michigan and nationwide, Engler became the state's first governor to assert that this political right should be nullified in the event of school "failure." The state has both a moral and constitutional duty, he argues, to change the school system governing Black and urban districts where leaders "fail" to generate "successful" student performance similar to that in non-

urban districts. Through the "School District Accountability Act," the Governor would seek to hold "accountable" those elected leaders who have "failed" their district's parents, students, and taxpayers generally, replacing them with outside leadership that is *really* committed to educating students and, thus, promoting state growth.

At the federal level, Bill Clinton had been leading the push for educational reform since his days as a Southern governor. Arguing that educational standards were necessary to protect and expand America's economic competitiveness, Clinton spearheaded discussions on national educational standards while governor of Arkansas during the late 1980s and early 1990s. During his tenure as President, Clinton was able to successfully pass both the Goals 2000 Act and the Improving America's Schools Act, marking the first time federal funding was appropriated to create and expand charter schools (Finn, Jr. 2019). Clinton had advocated for the most aggressive federal intervention in education since any president before him, and during a speech in 1995 he encouraged states across the nation to adopt charter school laws.

In March 1997, for the first time since Theodore Roosevelt, a sitting president came to Michigan's capitol to address the state legislature. Clinton's visit came only two years after Illinois' state takeover of Chicago Public Schools, eliminating their school board and shifting control of the district to the city's mayor (Clinton 1997). Addressing Michigan's Governor and the legislature, Clinton celebrated Chicago's reforms, and implored Michigan's political leaders to embrace charter schools, "choice," and competition, as a solution to educational inequality and the production of "high-performing" students (Clinton 1997). A year later, on October 22, 1998, Clinton signed the Charter School Expansion Act, which was designed "to support charter schools, providing parents and students with better schools, more choice, and higher levels of accountability in public education" (Clinton 1998)

Only several months after Engler floated his takeover idea, Beckham and New Detroit began setting up their DPS review team. The 18-member review panel, consisting primarily of representatives from the city's business community, would present their final report to the DPS Board of Education on the evening of July 3, 1997. Titled, *A Plan For Change*, the 46-page report recommended over 60 specific changes that "would overhaul the district's approach to administration, bookkeeping, training, purchasing and other support functions" (Hurt 1997). Beckham described the gravity of the Panel's findings. The report, declared Beckham, calls for a "fundamental restructuring of the school system's organization and management, as well as the manner in which the board performs its role" (Hurt 1997). Bella Marshall, Co-Chair of the review panel and President of Waycor Development Inc., a Detroit-based real estate development and construction firm, told the school board, "failure to take decisive action now…will further erode the district's credibility" (Hurt 1997). Marshall continued, stating that "accountability" was necessary for "successes and failures."

The Detroit Free Press highlighted what they called "the most radical recommendations" in the report, citing the seven provisions below:

- Remove the school board from daily administrative decisions
- Hire a chief operating officer to help the superintendent with daily affairs
- Create guidelines to prevent nepotism and vendor favoritism
- Let principals run their schools and their budgets
- Close the six area offices, an administrative layer between schools and central administration
- Train employees for the positions they hold and remove them if they prove unqualified
- Write out policies, procedures and standards for all duties: include rewards and punishments (Hurt 1997)

New Detroit's report would be used to call for far reaching "reform" of DPS by journalists and other political leaders across the state. By the end of 1998, DPS under intense scrutiny, with Beckham remarking that "the system is incapable of moving at the pace it needs to survive,"

suggesting that something fundamental needed to change in the way the district was managed (Ortiz 1998).

Shortly after these remarks by Beckham, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that in a "televised address, Archer told Detroiters that the chronically failing district and the school board are in their eleventh hour. Archer said the school board has to immediately quit making excuses or face an outside takeover. 'Get your act together,' he said…If the board fails, Archer said 'alternatives will be proposed'" (Detroit Free Press 1998). Beckham echoed Mayor Dennis Archer's statements. Speaking about the DPS board, Beckham told a reporter, "Learn what your role in decision-making is. And then do it…You must commit to timely change. You must commit to timely reform." He then went on to say that "the mayor's focus on a faster timetable was critical. Past reform took too long…Beckham said Archer did what no Detroit mayor has tried to do: publicly chide the school district, a separate political entity. For Archer to put the schools that high on his agenda marks a turning point for the district." (Detroit Free Press 1998)

These comments illustrate how the Black elite in Detroit played a critical role in the "reform" apparatus, mobilizing and extending the "reform" discourse, giving it a native or local voice. The takeover of DPS did not happen without the discursive participation and acquiescence, indeed willingness, of the city's Black elite to help extend that process. In other words, the linguistic dimension of takeover is not simply advanced by white elites only, but rather racial capitalists – a coalition of white and Black capitalists and other elites.

STATE INTERVENTION: THE TAKEOVER OF DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

It was during Engler's 1999 State of the State Address where he would ultimately set in motion the policy of DPS takeover. During that speech he explained the nature of educational

“failure” in Detroit, and once again emphasized the need to “empower parents with more information and more choices” (Engler 1999).

> Just weeks ago, Mayor Dennis Archer was very direct about the urgency of the problem in Detroit schools when he said, ‘For the great majority of our children, we are not even close to giving them the education they deserve.’ Sadly, I agree. President Clinton and Mayor Archer make it clear. This is not a partisan issue. This is not a racial issue. This is a children’s issue. We – the governor and the legislature, representing all the people of Michigan – have a moral obligation and a constitutional duty to act…So tonight, I call on you to give Michigan mayors the authority to break the bureaucracy, fix the schools, and put our children first! Each community and its needs are different. That’s why my plan strengthens local control so that a Mayor Archer…can tailor local solutions to meet local needs. This bold reform will make a positive difference in the lives of children who desperately need our help. The bottom line isn’t party or race, money or power. It is the children, and we must stand up for them!” (Engler 1999).

Engler’s call for “bold reform” for those “desperate” citizens in Detroit leveraged Archer’s support and was manifest in a call to the legislature to design new legislation, allowing the state to takeover DPS or other “failed’ districts and, ostensibly, transferring power over the district to the city’s mayor. In his speech, the Governor promoted a distinct type of school “reform” that adhered to the ideas and prescriptions of corporate elites, and conformed to the belief that non-urban, specifically white, districts were superior to Black urban districts because of better management. Conceptualizing “success” in this way has been powerfully productive, and ultimately led to the takeover of DPS.

During his State of the City Address titled, *The Road to Excellence*, Mayor Dennis Archer spoke about Detroit’s future. “Detroit’s destiny is…to benefit from an excellent public school system. So our journey has brought us to a critical period of decision regarding Detroit Public Schools,” stated the Mayor (Archer 1999). Archer would go on to connect school “reform” to the city’s broader urban development goals. “Motown, the city,” he declared, “can have the same impact on the world -- in community development, in entrepreneurship, in science

and technology, in the arts, and in education -- that Motown, the record company ...had years ago. We Detroiters -- the people in this room and those watching at home -- can make it happen…There is only one path. It is the road that requires hard work, sacrifice, patience and a dedication to high standards and worthy goals" (Archer 1999).

Nevertheless, one week later, at the Detroit Economic Club (DEC), the Mayor took an even stronger stance. The *Free Press* reported that Archer was finally "willing to take control of the Detroit school district because without highly educated citizens, Detroit will not reach its destiny to be a great city." The Mayor, who was quoted by the paper as saying he wants to "take this bull by the horns," alluding to DPS (Ortiz 1999). The DEC, Detroit's most prominent business platform, was established in 1934 as an "organization committed to the discussion and debate of important business, government and social issues" (Detroit Economic Club 2020). Since that time it has expanded, becoming revered and "known internationally as an important venue for prominent business and government leaders – a forum they can use to explore issues that will help shape the dynamic 21st century economic environment (Detroit Economic Club 2020).

The Club has hosted every US President since Richard Nixon, and in January of 1999, President Clinton himself spoke to the DEC about "the big challenges of the 21st century" (Clinton 1999, 21). Clinton's speech, delivered before Engler or Archer's, argued that continued growth of the US economy was the only way to ensure the nation would be prosperous for years to come. Central to that prosperity was providing young people with "the skills they need for a lifetime of competition in the global economy," which was to be fostered by promoting education "reform," including "more school choice and charter schools" (Clinton 1999, 22).

Archer's speech would reiterate this connection between school reform and growth, although emphasizing this dynamic at a local scale.

By March 1999, the state legislature would enact Public Act 10 of 1999, which established a "School Reform Board" for any Class A school district (a district where enrollment met or exceeded 100,000 students), of which the state only had one – Detroit (DeGrow 1999). Amazingly, the Governor, for all his declarations about the importance of reforming the public school system over the past decade, intentionally avoided language in the legislation that would trigger a takeover of any district based on some measurement of "failure." As one of Engler's aides said when the legislation was being crafted, "there would be no criteria such as test scores to determine which school districts would be eligible" (Gongwer News Service 1999).

The law itself did several things. First, it established a seven-member "School Reform Board," which would be partially responsible for overseeing the district for five years. Six of those members would be appointed by the Mayor of Detroit, the last member would be appointed by the Governor and have complete veto authority over any of the Board's decisions. The neoliberalization of the district was further evident in the law's creation of the district's first Chief Executive Officer (CEO) position. This CEO would be appointed by the School Reform Board. Once that CEO was installed, all the power formerly vested in the elected school board and the city's school superintendent would be transferred to them. Moreover, the law also established a "School District Accountability Board" at the state level, consisting of five members who are either direct appointed by the governor or in his cabinet.[10]

[10] These members include the superintendent of public instruction, the state treasurer, the state budget officer, and two members of the general public appointed by the governor.

CONCLUSION

The takeover of DPS was as much a *linguistic* takeover as it was a policy action. The Mackinac Center played a key role in the development of the "reform" discourse in Michigan, helping make "reform" synonymous not only with Black, urban schools, but specifically with Detroit. We saw the same dynamic in the Michigan Dept. of Education's report, *A New Framework for Education*, written by William B. Allen, who two years after that document's publication joined the Mackinac Center's board. (Mackinac Center 1998). The creation of charter schools and the market associated with them, as well as the meaning of "choice" were all enabled by the discourse of "reform" constructed by elites. Black elites, too, like Bill Beckham and Mayor Dennis Archer, also mobilized the discourse of "reform," further legitimating the discourse, offering Engler an opportunity to claim there was even high-profile, domestic, Detroit-based support for his agenda. Indeed, as he remarked in his State of the State speech in 1999, state intervention in Detroit couldn't be considered a race issue because Mayor Archer himself endorsed it. If a Black man endorses takeover it can't be racist…right?

CHAPTER THREE

THE EFFECTS OF "REFORM": RESISTANCE & THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SCHOOL "FAILURE"

As was demonstrated in the last chapter, the "failure" of Detroit Public Schools (DPS) was linguistically constructed through the discourse and practices of the education "reform" apparatus in Detroit. That apparatus included institutions and elites like the Mackinac Center, Governor John Engler, state officials, corporations, Michigan State University, Mayor Dennis Archer, and Bill Beckham Jr., among many others. By constructing DPS as a "failed" district and its students and teachers as "failures," the "reform" discourse helped make possible the context for state intervention in the City's public school system in 1999. In other words, the "reform" discourse was a precondition for the takeover; it played a vital role in constructing a reality where DPS was perceived as "failed," with market-based "reform" becoming the dominant prescription to that educational ailment.

A poll commissioned by *The Detroit News* in the lead up to the state's intervention in Detroit's public school system in 1999 revealed that Detroiters had mixed feelings about the takeover. 49% of them supported Engler's plan while another 44% opposed it. However, the polling data also revealed a broad racial divide when it came to the Governor's plan. Roughly 75% of whites in the city favored the state takeover of DPS, compared to "sixty-one percent of blacks" who "opposed state involvement" (McWhirter 1999). As I will argue in the present chapter, this opposition to state intervention by Black Detroiters was not only confined to the immediate pre-takeover period. Using the 1999-2006 takeover of DPS as a case study of "reform," or what I will call a "reform" *project*, this chapter explores two questions. First, what were the consequences or effects of the "reform" discourse on key stakeholders in Detroit Public Schools? Second, how did these key stakeholders respond to the consequences of "reform"?

THE DISPOSSESSION OF BLACK PUBLIC WEALTH (AND SELF)

The education “reform” discourse in Michigan birthed the state’s charter school movement, which has had significant consequences for Detroit’s public school system and those Black residents who depend on it. Although introduced as a “reform” to public school “failure” in Detroit by the Mackinac Center in 1990, the state would not enact its first charter school law until 1993, with the first charter school being founded the following year. Given that charter schools represent the market-based “reform” that elites have advocated, it has also followed that they represent new “incentives” and “competition.” Both of these – “incentives” and “competition” - have been implemented in a way that has *created a new market* for Black children in Detroit. The foundation grant introduced by Engler was such that it followed a student to whichever school district they went to, whether that district was a public school district or a public charter school. As the law stated, charter schools or Public School Academies were equivalent to a school district. This new charter school market, a market for the minds of Black children, would have profoundly negative consequences for DPS. While the introduction of competition and incentives indeed created “wealth opportunities,” these “opportunities” emerged at the direct expense of Black political and educational autonomy, with little evidence of “achievement” gains – the alleged purpose of “reform” and state takeover itself.

For example, Tale 3 provides us with insight into the actual amount of money each charter school received, on average, per student from 1996-2009. If we focus primarily on the takeover period from 1999 through 2006, we see that funding to charter schools increased significantly. In 1999, charter schools received almost $6400 for every “customer” they received, a total that reflected a combination of state, federal and local revenue. However, by 2006, that amount increased by more than $2000 to almost $8600. During that same period, public schools received slightly more revenue per student - $7154 in 1999 and almost $9000 in 2006.

However, the Table reveals a crucial difference; unlike charter schools, a large portion of public school funding comes from "Local Revenue." In 1999, local revenue accounted for $1245, or 17% of total public school revenue. That local share rose to almost 23% of total public school revenue by 2006. During the same period, local school funding accounted for only 2.5% of total charter school revenue in 1999, rising slightly to 3.2% in 2006. Thus, this means total revenue per student was only higher for public schools because of grater local investment. Relatedly, as can be seen from comparing "State Revenue" columns for both charter and public schools, since their founding, charter schools have always received more revenue from the state than public schools. In other words, the state not only created a new market but also uneven competition, structuring competition to favor charter schools.

	Charter Schools				Public Schools			
Year	Total Revenue	State Revenue	Federal Revenue	Local Revenue	Total Revenue	State Revenue	Federal Revenue	Local Revenue
1996	6301	5414	426	134	6495	4883	260	1138
1997	6821	5719	207	246	6735	5038	311	1194
1998	6551	5994	292	261	7097	5362	326	1196
1999	6383	5976	238	165	7154	5306	361	1245
2000	6839	6361	300	171	7449	5512	377	1319
2001	7407	6703	434	189	7863	5849	365	1354
2002	7850	7035	507	177	8359	6179	416	1393
2003	8031	7179	602	132	8393	6148	439	1408
2004	8391	7152	618	217	8538	6117	555	1787
2005	8459	7206	668	279	8813	6095	580	1936
2006	8583	7338	655	279	8908	6229	573	2032

Table 3. Mean Per Student Revenue (current $): Total, State, Federal and Local Government

The Chart of course only provides average data, and not specific data on charter schools in Detroit and therefore serves as an imperfect proxy for understanding the specific size of Detroit's charter market created by the "reform" discourse in the lead up to and aftermath of the takeover. However, given the state's targeting of Detroit for "reform," the chart does offer strong insights. This is because, as Izraeli and Murphy have found, the lion's share of charter

schools and charter enrollments are in the Detroit, Wayne County (the home of Detroit), and tri-county metro Detroit area. They note that:

> "Within Wayne County from 1999 and on anywhere from 33.9% to 35.9% of all Michigan charters operate within the county. During this same time period, the percent of all Michigan charter school students enrolled at Wayne County charters ranges between 41.8% and 42.5%. Looking at the larger tri-county area of Wayne-Oakland-Macomb, we find that the number of charters steadily increases from 41.3% in 1999 to 49.8% in 2006. Charter enrollments in the tri-county area account for 62% of the entire Michigan charter school population by the end of the period. Clearly, charter schools and charter school enrollments are concentrated in the Detroit area, hence, the comparatively large ratio of African American students attending charters…reflects to significant degree the larger African American population in the Detroit metropolitan area" (Izraeli and Murphy 2012, 244n12)

A major consequence, then, of spatializing the "reform" discourse by centering it on Detroit, has been the creation of an uneven charter school market across the state. As a result, these market-based schools have targeted Black students from DPS, "marketing" their schools as more "effective" and "better" alternative to public education. Once again, the "reform" discourse is incredibly productive, this time for educational entrepreneurs and those seeking to attract new "customers." And of course, the more students enroll in charter schools the more influence the "reform" discourse can claim (and wield).

"Reform" and "Equity": A Note on Proposal A

Given that Proposal A was part of the "reform" agenda, I should say a few words about its effectiveness as a policy to promote "equity" in school funding (in addition to being a crucial policy in the development of the charter market). The law, which shifted responsibility of funding away from local schools to the state, has been celebrated by Engler, legislators, and many journalists and observers from across the political spectrum as a dramatic and bold solution to solving the long-standing funding inequalities plaguing Michigan's school districts (Hammer

2011, 124). However, recent research reveals this assumption may be unfounded. Peter J. Hammer, Director of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University in Detroit has closely studied the evolution of school finance in Michigan. His analysis of Proposal A reveals the "common misperception that state per-pupil funding in the wake of Proposal A was equalized" (2011, 124). However, far from "reforming" the school finance system to achieve equal school funding across districts, Proposal A did the opposite, solidifying "forms of absolute inequality into the state finance formula, with a soft commitment to try to narrow the bands of inequality over time" (Hammer 2011, 124-125). But how, exactly, did Proposal A institutionalize existing funding inequalities in Michigan's school system?

First, under Proposal A, districts would now receive a per-pupil foundation grant from the state to cover all of their operating expenses. "The most influential factor in determining a district's initial foundation grant was the amount of per-pupil revenues it received just prior to the implementation of the foundation grant; the total (state and local) per-pupil revenue each district received in FY1994" (Citizens Research Council 2011, 10). Obviously creating the state's new funding system based on the per-pupil revenue generated by the old school financing scheme had the result of institutionalizing the funding inequalities that existed under the old system. Thus, the first year Proposal A took effect in FY1995, Detroit's per-pupil foundation grant was $5,900 while an adjacent suburb, Southfield, received a grant of $9,458 (Hudson Jr. 1997, 25; MI Dept. of Ed 2000). Because it was not politically feasible to decrease the amount of money the wealthiest school districts spent on their children, legislators instead established an annual minimum per-pupil foundation grant. By establishing this foundation "floor" they raised per-pupil spending in the state's poorest district's. The foundation grant floor in FY1995, was $4,200 per-pupil. In FY1994 there were 105 school districts below that number and therefore

benefitted from the minimum foundation grant established under Proposal A (Citizens Research Council 2011, 12). While this decreased inequality in terms of absolute spending, it did not eliminate the spending gap, which brings us to the second issue with the law.

Proposal A also included a "hold harmless" provision that protected wealthy districts from having to either freeze educational spending at their current levels or decrease their spending to achieve per-pupil funding equalization with other, poorer districts. The Citizens Research Council (CRC) of Michigan, an independent, public interests research firm has analyzed local and state policies in Michigan for roughly a century, producing numerous reports about the state's public-school system. In a 2011 study of school finance in Michigan, the CRC described how this hold harmless provision worked:

> The state participated in the foundation program for those districts up to $6,500 in total state and local revenue for FY1995. Anything above that amount, local districts were required to fund entirely from the hold harmless tax. For example, a district with total per-pupil revenue of $8,000 in FY1995 had to raise the additional $1,500 ($8,000 foundation grant minus $6,500 state maximum grant) from a supplemental local property tax (Citizens Research Council 2011, 12).

This hold harmless clause, in other words, exempted wealthier school districts, primarily in majority white suburbs, from having to limit educational spending in their district to achieve "equity." This was another institutional mechanism ensuring unequal school funding based on race and class.

Third, despite shifting the burden of operating expenses to the state, capital expenses continued to depend on local property taxes. As Hammer correctly notes, this "immediately hamstrings efforts at establishing equity in any broad or universal sense. The inequalities embedded in vastly disparate local property bases are retained for capital planning" (Hammer 2011, 125). With property values falling in Detroit during the postwar period and continuing through the 1990s, the assistance the district needed for school maintenance and construction

would not be addressed by this new funding system. Relatedly, shifting operating funding to the state also meant that the state acquired greater control over districts, specifically how they spent their money, reflecting the state's increasing intervention in local school politics (Mirel 2003, 120).

Yet, for *some*, Proposal A does seem to have been a benefit. For example, the CRC determined that despite achieving "considerable progress" in closing the gap in school funding between school districts, this accomplishment has overwhelmingly benefitted white students. Indeed, conducting the most comprehensive study to date on Proposal A's effect on school funding in Michigan, they found that "districts with the highest concentrations of non-white students did not benefit the most from per-pupil equalization (2011, 54). In fact, between 1994 and 2009, school districts whose African American population exceeded 33% saw a decline in their average foundation grant by 3%." Obviously with DPS' Black enrollment exceeding 90% during the takeover period, this observation would apply to them. "Yet, over that same period, school districts that were virtually all-white (less than 1% African American) experienced a 10% increase in school funding" (CRC 2011, 54). Thus, the report concluded, African American school districts were harmed by the enactment of Proposal A in 1995, a development which seems to have only gotten worse.

The $1.5 Billion Question: What Happened to the Bond Money?

Although elite's had characterized DPS' elected leadership as "failed", and mired in mismanagement and corruption, it was during the takeover that the public school system experienced the largest and most significant financial scandal in the district's history. Under the tenure of DPS CEO Kenneth S. Burnley, who held the position from July 1, 2000 until June 30, 2005, a series of real estate deals were brokered that not only demonstrate a severe lack of "due

diligence" and "inexplicable spending," according to DPS' chief investigator of the transactions (Duggan 2009a), but the district's own lawyers involved with the deals raised questions about their legality and financial logic (Bobb 2011, 30–31, 35, 38). This scandal, once again, raises serious questions about what constitutes "failure" within a large urban school system, and particularly, who has the ability to impregnate that term with meaning. While the bond scandal, which was responsible for transferring hundreds of millions of dollars to white developers, construction firms, and real estate brokers, was understood and criticized by local DPS stakeholders as a key objective of the takeover, elites have heralded it as "highly successful" (Duggan 2009b).

In this section, I explore how expropriation of DPS wealth by a coalition of state actors and capitalists was a primary concern of stakeholders and community members, significantly shaping their understanding of the objectives of the takeover as well as their resistance to it. These Detroiters, as the interview data shows, were particularly concerned about the use of DPS' bond money under state takeover, real estate deals negotiated under the "reform" regime, and increasing privatization of the district. Additionally, I review a 2011 report prepared by DPS' Office of Inspector General (OIG), which investigated the management of the district's 1994 bond program and several prominent real estate deals initiated during the 1999 takeover. Details from the report, the most comprehensive analysis of real estate investments deals brokered during the takeover period, supports stakeholders' claims that white capitalists were rewarded handsomely during that reform period. Using interviews and the OIG report, I broadly outline how the takeover facilitated the dispossession of district resources, thus grounding the political and discursive dissent explored later in the chapter.

State intervention in DPS was, for some teachers, parents and activists in Detroit, part of a larger plan, designed to facilitate the extraction of Black wealth from the district. Wilma Taylor-Costen, who became the principle of Catherine Blackwell Institute in 2000 and rejected the narrative of DPS "failure," emphasized this point. She recalls an outside "mentality of let's control Detroit Public Schools…whether it was the state or the governor, all these different folk wanted to have their hands in Detroit because…Detroit Public Schools was a Fortune 500, millions of dollars flowing through that district." "And," she asks, "Black people having control over that kind of money?" implying, sarcastically, that white elites had an aversion to such an immense pool of public wealth being managed and distributed by Black officials (Taylor-Costen 2019). Taylor-Costen's characterization of DPS as a "Fortune 500" company conveys the fiscal magnitude, and thus economic significance, of the district. To quote Jeffrey Robinson, a teacher at the Malcolm X Academy (MXA) in 1999 before the school eventually merged with Paul Robeson Malcolm X Academy[11], given the magnitude of money under DPS' control "it made sense for the state to come after Detroit Public Schools first; it had more resources" (J. D. Robinson 2019) With DPS enrolling over 170,000 students during the 1998-1999 school year, it's true that all other districts in the state were dwarfed by DPS' $1.5 billion budget (A. Anderson and Martin 1998, 6).

In addition to having one of the biggest urban school operating budgets in the nation, Detroiter's voted against the wishes of city elites in 1994 and successfully passed the largest school bond in US history at the time. As a result, DPS was to acquire control of a historic $1.5 billion dollars to update and repair the city's public school buildings, which were in desperate need of capital improvements. As Education Week reported, "the bond issue, which will be

[11] Malcolm X Academy was closed and merged with the Paul Robeson Academy in 200X. The school is now referred to as the Paul Robeson Malcolm X Academy.

spent on school construction and new technology, won even without the backing of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, Mayor Dennis Archer, and other civic and business leaders. Supporters relied instead on a determined grassroots campaign" (Schmidt 1994).

Detroiters critical of takeover saw the bond money as a major factor motivating the takeover. "The bond money…was a very attractive sort of crown jewel…of the district," said Ebony, whose position in DPS headquarters provided her unique, first-hand experience with the inner workings of the central office (2019). She continues, explaining that in 1999 and "immediately afterwards we [got] some new schools built and the School Center building was sold to Wayne State University." State and business officials "needed…a reason for it to happen," she continues, and the charges of "failures" were mobilized to make it happen (Ebony 2019). Reflecting on over two decades of experience with DPS, Ebony, who once held a top position in the district, is convinced that the structural transformation of the school system was sparked by the 1999 takeover, and reflected a "long-range plan for Detroit," a "20-year plan." "You had to start somewhere," she says. "So if you could capture that bond money, that property, that was where you started" (Ebony 2019).

In fact, shortly after the 1994 bond, or Proposal S as it was presented on the ballot, passed, some grassroots activists voiced skepticism about the future of the bond program. According to Dr. John Telford, a former DPS superintendent who also taught in the district for more than 40 years, "Queen Mother" Helen Moore confided in him and several others, stating that she heard rumblings that DPS would never control the bond money (Telford 2019). The Queen Mother is one of Detroit's most prominent grassroots leaders and school activists in the past half-century, founding Black Parents for Quality Education (BPQE) on October 24,1971 (Moore 2019). BPQE was originally created to combat racism in the DPS schools where its

members' children attended. However, the parent-based, grassroots organization would expand, and advocate for the rights of Black students across Detroit and confronted opponents of busing[12]. With respect to the 1994 bond, Moore had particular insights because of her work in a student advocacy organization.

Recalling her experience shortly after the bond's passage, Moore remarked, "They were saying, 'Detroit is crazy. They ain gettin none of this money. They gonna take all of this money from them." Moore further explained that, "I was with the Student Advocacy Center in Ann Arbor…with [political] representatives…that were actually running the state. And superintendents. And they were white and they sitting there…talking about it, tellin me everything" (Moore 2019). She continued, stating that, "you can't work in a vacuum and do what I do. You sometimes, you gotta know what both sides are doin. You gotta have some white friends, some so-called white friends, in order to let you know…they'll tell you that they're getting ready to do some dangerous things to you all." And as a result, Moore says, "I go back and tell the people. 'Hey, they gonna take our money.' All this stuff we worked on, what we gon' get for our schools, we ain' gon' get it'" (Moore 2019). Unfortunately, Moore's warnings about the seizure of the District's bond money materialized during the 1999 takeover, representing a massive transfer of wealth from residents to white corporations.

During the interviews, stakeholders connected local processes of expropriation with broader historical practices of racial subordination. Educators and activist who helped establish African-Centered schooling in Detroit, for example, believed the takeover was driven by a pursuit of bond money by the state, and for some, a general antipathy towards the mounting successes of the ACE movement in DPS. According to Victor Gibson, a thirty-year DPS veteran

[12] For more about Moore and BPQE activism see (Mirel 1999 349, 360).

and ACE activist, to comprehend the takeover we must go “back to the bond money in 94, to give…some kind of impetus if not only why they wanted it but the benefits of them doing it. And the benefit was more than just the idea of you know money…this bond money. 1.5 billion dollars is a good little piece of money” (Gibson 2019). And, had Board members planned on spending that money primarily with white construction companies like Barton Malow, there wouldn’t have been the same drive to takeover DPS. “But it’s when we said we're going to take the bond money, use it to build the infrastructure, give it to Black contractors, let them win the money” that state machinations began. Now, “couple that with the fact that we were instituting, at that time, African-Centered curriculum. And we were going district wide. The African-Centered curriculum scared the shit out of em. That was the whole impetus” (Gibson 2019).

Gibson continues, emphasizing the need to understand the takeover of DPS, and ACE, in a broader historical context. “The whole thing of education” for Blacks in the US, he asks, “was what?” The answer: “do not teach, educate children of color. So we went from not being able to pick up a book to all of a sudden,” with the establishment of ACE in Detroit, “the book that we pick up is about us” (Gibson 2019). Moore, too, believes that the takeover was about controlling the district’s bond revenue and Black autonomy, “because what they want to do is…keep” Blacks permanent second-class citizens. “You have to use the word permanent, now, because we already second-class. Permanent. We don't crawl out of this” (Moore 2019). Here both Gibson and Moore emphasize the takeover’s material consequences, both economically and racially, and see these intertwined processes as reflective of longer trends in American history. Thus, with DPS having been under some form of state control from 1999 through 2016, Gibson laments that “there’s not a student [I’ve taught], there’s not a student in DPS” during that period “who hasn’t been directly impacted by” these takeovers in negative ways (Gibson 2019).

In early 2009, in response to “several inquiries and expressions of concern” about real estate deals brokered during the 1999 takeover of DPS, the district’s newly appointed Emergency Financial Manager, Robert Bobb, worked with the District’s Office of Inspector General (OIG), Wilbert V. Marsh, to launch an investigation into how reform leaders had managed the $1.5 billion bond program (Bobb 2011, 1). The findings of that inquiry were published in a 2011 report produced by the OIG’s office referred to here as the Bobb Report. During the course of their inquiry, the EFM and Inspector General were astonished to find an “absence of documents and records related to and supporting these real estate transactions,” and spoke of substantial evidence of “waste and abuse” of District bond money between 1999 and 2005 (Marsh 2012, 12). And while the report concluded that “there was no evidence of violations of law,” it clearly details how white developers and construction companies exploited the district, some of them enjoying a virtual monopoly on district contracts.

The Bobb Report opens by criticizing the “elected school board,” stating that they had “no plan in place to spend the bond money to improve the DPS facilities’ condition” (2011, 1). Similarly, Burnley and his top advisors testified that the “1994 bond program, planning, and spending had been slow and ineffective” (Bobb 2011, 17). Yet, when investigators asked Burnley for a copy of the goals and objectives of his bond program, he produce nothing. “He was unable to shed much light on the whereabouts or actual contests of his team’s ‘strategic plan’. He did not have a copy” and “did not know where it could be located” (Bobb 2011, 18). However, he was able to indicate that his prime objective was to spend the bond money “very quickly” (Bobb 2011, 17). In fact, spending the bond money rapidly and attempting, almost exclusively, on reducing DPS’ operating costs, outweighed any “alternative strategies for effective and proper spending of the bond money” (Bobb 2011, 18).

Probably the single largest transfer of wealth from the majority Black district to capitalists during the takeover occurred through the relocation of DPS' headquarters. Moving the school's central office operations from the Maccabees School Center building, a property which the district owned, to newly purchased and leased office space in the New Center area of Detroit was baffling to stakeholders. "It made no sense on so many levels," said Robinson about the move, except that we "were witnessing a transfer of wealth" (J. D. Robinson 2019). He goes on to compare DPS to majority white, suburban school districts, arguing that the state's approach to DPS was unique. "The school district was like a pot of money sitting there but [they] couldn't get to it cuz those niggas was sitting there." They had to "move the niggas out the way." Mimicking a dealer at a card table, Robinson continues, gesturing, "here's a piece for you, here's a piece for you. And here's a piece for you. That's what started happening…[I]n my opinion…They wouldn't have dreamed about going to" white suburban school districts in metro Detroit "and telling…their school board, move out of a building that's free and clear and rent" (J. D. Robinson 2019). The sale of the School Center Building and the subsequent purchase and leasing of office space in the New Center area "didn't make economic sense then, it doesn't make economic sense now" (J. D. Robinson 2019). According to Robinson, the removal of Blacks from key positions of institutional power through state takeover facilitated the privatization of the district and the accumulation of white wealth.

On May 22, 2002, CEO Burnley signed a $24.1 million contract with the white-owned, suburban-based real estate company, the Farbman Group, for five floors of office space in the Fisher Building that is often referred to as DPS' "condominium" space, and 720 parking spaces in the surrounding area (Bobb 2011, 9). Burnley justified the condo purchase, arguing that relocating DPS' headquarters to the Fisher Building was necessary because DPS staff was

anticipated to shrink in the coming years and therefore not as much office space would be needed. Ultimately, the move was presented as helping reduce district operating costs in the long run[13]. However, the OIG investigation challenges this assumption, and in fact reveals that the relocation scheme not only cost DPS tens of millions of dollars, but resulted in an obscene enrichment of white real estate firms. For example, although DPS paid about $24 million for five floors in the Fisher Building in 2002, just the year before, the Farbman Group purchased the entire 30-story building for $21.7 million (Bobb 2011, 11). The condominium space, which totaled 132,087 square feet, was less than half the size of the School Center Building, which had 270,144 square feet of space. Given that DPS' condominium space wasn't enough for the district's entire administrative staff, Burnley had to spend even more money to acquire additional office space.

In all, over the next two years, DPS signed six leases for additional office space in the New Center area, all with Farbman-owned properties. Ultimately, DPS was paying an additional $1.7 million annually for the leased space over the next ten years, at which point they would have to renegotiate their lease or purchase space somewhere else. Astonishingly, when Burnley signed the purchase agreement for DPS' condo, there were already tenants on three of the floors they bought, some of whom, like New Detroit, weren't slated to leave for at least a decade (Bobb 2011, 10). As a result, Farbman placed DPS in transitional space until the property they purchased became vacated. The Bobb Report noted that "at such time" DPS was to move into their condo space vacated by these previous tenants, the district would "incur additional

[13] In the Bobb Report, the Burnley reform team claims that "the Maccabees School Center Building's annual operating costs [were] between $3.5 to $4 million, and included security, maintenance, custodial, utilities, and repairs (19). Operating costs would be significantly reduced, they suggested, because Farbman agreed to "reimburse DPS for all operating maintenance, repair and replacement costs and expense without limitation including security, janitorial services, and fire alarm services (10-11).

construction costs to modify the spaces to meet its requirements and then DPS will incur additional costs to move from the transitional space" (2011, 10).

The bond money, which was approved by Detroit's taxpayers, was expressly earmarked for school construction, renovation, and new technology for the classrooms, sparking concerns about the legality of using bond money to relocate DPS' headquarters. Thus, a logical question should be asked as to whether or not it was appropriate, even legal, to spend over $70 million dollars of bond money to move the district headquarters from one location to another (Bobb 2011, XX). Moreover, the fact that tens of millions of dollars was being spent by the district's CEO with absolutely no oversight, further reveals a unique institutional transformation which helped facilitate the exploitation of Black public wealth. Still, the real estate deal was not the only transaction with white capitalists that aroused suspicions and condemnation from Black stakeholders.

The report also details other issues with the administration of the bond money during the state takeover, including the exorbitant management fees received by the DPS Program Management Team (PMT), the six-firm consortium created to manage the bond program. This team consisted of Barton Malow, Jomar Building Company, W-3 Construction, CTE Engineers, H&N, and AMCM, LLC. While Barton Malow, a white owned construction company, originally "retained the largest share of ownership among the six firms," the consortium was eventually restructured due to criticism received by Detroiters about the PMT's marginalization of Black builders (Bobb 2011, 77). As a result, Jomar Construction, a Black construction firm, would ultimately chair the PMT.

PMT's contract with DPS was designed so that all members would not only be reimbursed for their general costs and labor expenses, but they would also receive significant

fees simply for managing the construction companies they hired (Bobb 2011, 77-78). Management fees for the $1.5 billion bond program should have cost the district around $15 million experts suggest (Schultz 2009). However, the OIG investigation found that DPS paid PMT $164 million in program management fees (Bobb 2011, 113). In the end, Barton Malow would make approximately $38 million in fees, and together with H&N and CTE Engineers, white developers pulled in more than $71 million, or about 43% of the total management fees. Still, in this instance, Black companies also reaped significant profits, totaling close to $93 million. These fees drawn from bond revenue, represented funds redirected away from the rehabilitation or construction of new schools and into the hands of private corporations (J. D. Robinson 2019).

Revelations from the Bobb report are significant, because, according to stakeholders, it represents a particular level of vindication, even if it may feel like too little, too late. Speaking about the revelations unearthed in the Bobb report, Robinson says that, "[w]e're only now able to get recognition that we weren't actually crazy when we were yelling and screaming about it as it was happening, because now it's undeniable. It's undeniable now," criticizing many of the deals as nothing more than "economic welfare" for corporations.

In total, the investigation into the 1994 bond program revealed at least $145 million[14] spent unnecessarily with white corporations money that was not originally allocated to these companies under the elected school board. The Fisher building is not "something that I would have authorized as the superintendent," said Eddie Green in a 2007 interview. Green, the

[14] This is a conservative estimate computed by the author based on data provided in the 2011 Bobb Report. This number includes the $71 million headquarters move, $71 million in management fees received by white construction firms through the PMT, $3.8 million on a parking structure for DPS teachers that was never used and cost over $60,000 per year to maintain, and Farbman's commission fees from selling DPS' Maccabees School Center Building and other real estate deals on the district's behalf.

superintendent of DPS before the takeover as well as a few months into it, went on to speculate that, "maybe that's one of the reasons" he was removed (E. Green 2007).

BLACK RESISTANCE AND THE STRUGGLE OVER EDUCATION "REFORM"

In-depth interviews with key stakeholders reveal meanings and understandings of school "failure" that diverged, intersect, and also complicate mainstream views of DPS, ultimately offering alternative views of "reform." The mainstream narrative of "failure," according to the interviews analyzed, was used primarily to *justify* intervention in the district, to *produce,* or influence the belief that DPS was a school system experiencing unique and extraordinary political crisis. The following excerpt from an interview with Robinson outlines concerns voiced by many DPS stakeholders and provides an alternative narrative of DPS during the 1990s.

> Q: What do you remember about DPS before that first takeover in 1999?
>
> A: Well, prior to the state takeover…that period between 91 and say 98-99, Detroit was *flourishing*. They still had over a *hundred thousand students* in the district. We still operated well *over [200] school buildings* across the city of Detroit…I like to put it this way. The Detroit Public Schools had a *budget bigger* than the City of Detroit at its height….It was the largest employer. It was the *largest landowner* in the city, which again, as we look back, it *made sense for the state* to come after Detroit Public Schools first; it had more *resources*.
>
> Q: What do you remember about that first takeover?
>
> A: These were *state made emergencies that justified, loosely, what the state already had planned on doing initially to begin with*…When the governor is creating this financial emergency, there were over 350 something school districts in existence, and well over 2/3 of them were doing worse than Detroit… So now you go back into…the picture that I believe white capitalists are looking at in terms of this primarily Black city, all right. It has a hundred million dollars in the rainy day fund, x amount of millions in operating Capital. All their bills are paid…So…if we go back and we look, one has to ask: where was the financial emergency? There really wasn't one…Nothing that was being done to Detroit, in the majority of white folks' mind, particularly the legislature, nothing the governor was proposing deserved or warranted a deep investigation (J. D. Robinson 2019).

Here Robinson, who had long been a teacher and later principal of PRMXA, like other DPS stakeholders, saw district performance in starkly different terms than the state and other elites driving the dominant education "reform"" discourse rooted in assumptions of district "failure." In the passage above, Robinson observes that there wasn't a crisis in DPS until the state created or "made" one. Here, the making or production of school failure, what Robinson calls education "emergencies," was undertaken to justify state intervention and expand corporate access to district resources. The former Principal of Catherine C. Blackwell Institute, Taylor-Costen similarly commented, noting that the first takeover was "contrived. It was created" (Taylor-Costen 2019). By framing DPS "failure," not as the consequence of inept school leaders or the result of low test scores, but as the intentional consequence of state action, these informants offer alternative discourses around school reform in Detroit.

Generally, respondents rejected the narrative of school "failure" by critically addressing two issues often raised by the state and other advocates of school reform: test scores and DPS' fiscal health. Discussing the charge of both academic and fiscal "failure," Ebony[15], a high-level employee working in DPS' Office of Research, Evaluation, Assessment and Accountability (OREAA) before, during and after the 1999 takeover, described the discursive battle taking place over school reform in Detroit. According to this former administrator, the takeover occurred because of a "perceived academic and financial issue…and the academic issue was false. And the financial issue was false; we had a surplus at the time of takeover" (Ebony 2019). In other words, states Ebony, it was based on a "false premise." "But it was a lie that was sold very well and people were willing to believe" it (Ebony 2019). She continued, discussing how the lie was

[15] Ebony is a pseudonym to protect the identity of this former DPS employee. Do you describe how you came to use pseudonyms in the methods section of the introduction?

part of an intense "propaganda" campaign led by individuals "from Lansing and from people who had a long-range plan for Detroit – a 20-year plan." In the months before the takeover, Ebony recalls the OREAA "fought…against the propaganda," compiling "talking points" and "facts, evidence, and data" to disseminate to residents and counteract the narrative of DPS "failure" (Ebony 2019). Similar to Robinson and Taylor-Costen, Ebony here alludes to a discursive dimension of school reform, a realm which is essential to the material restructuring of the district.

Fmr. state representative Lamar Lemmons, who was serving in the Michigan legislature during the first takeover, stated that there was no justifiable grounds for the state's takeover of DPS in 1999. Legislators "needed to come up with a rationale for the state to takeover," but "there was none…because academically, and this is another important part, we were in the middle of the state in MEAP test scores. So there were as many school districts below us as there were above us. So, if they used strictly academic criteria they would have been one term legislators because many of them have large, white impoverished district who would've fit the category of the takeover" (Lemmons 2019). Telford, who served as a district superintendent for several school districts including Detroit, also disagreed with the "reform" discourse. When speaking about DPS in the lead up to the 1999 takeover, he recalls the district being run by a "good superintendent named Dr. Eddie Green" (Telford 2019). Furthermore, explains Telford, "the school district had a…surplus and importantly…student test scores were at the state midpoint and rising" (2019). The comments by Lemmons and Telford show that some key stakeholders rejected the assumption of academic and fiscal "failure" mobilized by mainstream institutions and elites, indeed suggesting that many districts in Michigan were much worse off than DPS.

Community members were also skeptical of charges of fiscal mismanagement and corruption. For example, in the above quote, Robinson asks about DPS, "where was the financial emergency?" He then responds, "[t]here really wasn't one" (J. D. Robinson 2019). As is often brought up by district stakeholders, DPS not only had a budget surplus, but was also sitting on over one billion dollars in bond money earmarked for district improvements. Additionally, given the operating budget of the district which exceeds a billion dollars, many residents and observers found it hard to accept (or even see) a fiscal crisis during the 1999-2000 school year.

Of course, Detroit's school leaders have also been accused of fiscal malfeasance and outright corruption, criticisms that have been leveraged to demand governance changes in the district. District stakeholders are aware of these claims, but often approach this issue differently. Gibson, the distinguished DPS veteran and school activist, rejected the idea of state intervention in DPS as a solution to address corruption. He explains why he refuses to accept takeover as an answer to school "failure." "Oh they use things like…he's a schoolboard member and he uses credit cards to pay for rides." Or, he says sarcastically, maybe somebody is "taking money out of the athletic fund. 'Oh yea, he's got over two thousand dollars man, two thousand dollars!'" In either case, Gibson continues, "they use these small, little petty crimes" to justify the removal of school officials. Yet, if the state were indeed interested in improving the financial health of the district, Gibson asks, then why would they leave the district in worse fiscal health than it found it? "[Y]our goal was to come and stop this little small leak, but you basically took the boat and knocked a big hole in it and let it just flood out. That you didn't want to deal with. But you want to talk about that drip over here" (Gibson 2019) Comparing accusations of "corruption" to a

minor leak in a boat, Gibson views the state's action as exponentially more damaging to the district than anything local leaders were engaged in.

In fact, far from believing DPS or its leadership was a "failure," many of the stakeholders I interviewed echoed Robinson's characterization of DPS during the 1990s as "flourishing." One area where the district excelled, for example, was in special education. During my interview with Taylor-Costen she reflected on DPS' role as a national leader in special education. "We were thriving. Number one in the country in terms of special ed. People would come to Detroit to see what was going on" (Taylor-Costen 2019). Lemmons concurs, "we had the best special education program in the nation" (Lemmons 2019). Their observations were sustained by Ebony who stated that DPS was "absolutely" a model for educating special needs students in a large urban school district: "We were sought out…to speak on the national stage. To present to national groups" (Ebony 2019). Ebony further explains the goals and objectives of special education in DPS before the first takeover:

> They were very proactive around including, not restricting, access to the general classroom for children who had IEPs [individualized education programs]. Basically helping teachers to understand how children learn differently and how having a special educator in the room with you could help you with the children who didn't have IEPs so that you could differentiate learning…So it actually helped our general ed. population and our special education population. There was accountability around the education those children received. People checked from central office on what teachers were doing in the classroom. It was the most scrutinized part of educational system I would say in DPS and that is really what helped educators who taught children with IEPs …. The Mantra in our heads as special educators was we want to make ourselves obsolete in the lives of these children (Ebony 2019).

There were additional bases, according to stakeholders, for rejecting the narrative of school "failure," who often insisted instead on privileging the districts' pre-takeover "success." They spoke about the number of school buildings and district enrollment, a budget surplus, rising test scores and Detroit's historic approval of the $1.5 billion bond. When asked how Detroit's

public school system was performing before the 1999 takeover, Lemmons recalls the district making substantial improvements, and said it was "probably one of the better urban school districts in the country. In fact," he continues, of school districts where the majority of students received free and reduced lunches, and student enrollment exceeded one hundred thousand, "we were the number one school district" in the nation when measured by test scores (Lemmons 2019). While I was unable to independently corroborate Lemmons' observation, it's telling that, for some stakeholders, the meaning of DPS' "success" or "failure" was contextualized within a broader recognition of systemic inequality, and thus any discussion of its performance must be examined relative to its peers. Lemmons' is explicit on this point: "Now, could we compete with middle class school districts? Absolutely, not. But apples to apples, we were the number one district in the nation. Or you could say the best of the worst if you will. When I say the worst, class, socioeconomic status…is the greatest predictor, so we can say that adjusting for socioeconomic class we were the best" (Lemmons 2019).

Political Challenges to Education "Reform"

> From Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955 when I, the Mother of Civil Rights, Rosa Parks, refused to give up my seat on the bus to a white man, we now find ourselves once again fighting for our rights. This time, in the year 2000, our most sacred right, the right to vote, has been snatched from us without a vote of the people by certain elected officials…Without the right to vote, we are still slaves. We know that we should be able to elect our own school board as all other citizens of Michigan can without unjustly being denied that fundamental right by elected officials…We, the citizens of Detroit are asking you, Judge Nancy Edmunds to hear our plea and to right the wrong by applying the equal protection of the law. Don't allow this illegal and immoral law to become the modern day instrument of turning the clock back (Parks 2000).

Resistance to Black school "reform" in Detroit was not confined to the level of discourse but was also manifest in various forms of political struggle, like protests, lawsuits, direct action tactics and even electoral challenges. As the epigraph opening this section illustrates, Detroit

citizens and school stakeholders held important concerns about education "reform," especially the elimination of the elected school board in 1999, given its deeper significance for voting rights in the nation's largest majority-Black city and the meaning of Black citizenship more broadly.

The opening quote of this section is from a rough draft of an amicus brief that Rosa Parks, the civil rights icon, would later revise in consultation with Moore, and submit in support of a lawsuit against the Detroit School Reform Board and other state officials. By the late 1990s, BPQE had transformed into the Keep The Vote-No Takeover Coalition (KTV/NT), which Moore continues to lead today. A 2010 profile of Moore in the Detroit News describes her as a "city resident for more than 70 years, mother of four DPS graduates and grandmother of a current student" (Hicks 2010). It continues, noting that Moore "vehemently opposed the 1999 state takeover of the district" and "also fought against mayoral control of schools, privatization" and other school restructuring efforts.

Moore's battles against market-based school "reforms" in Detroit are grounded in a strong conviction, held by many stakeholders, that white elites have intentionally sought to dismantle DPS, and in so doing, constrain Black citizenship. "What they wanted to do was make sure we never had any control. The whole aim of this entire takeover," explains Moore, "is to make sure our district maintained a second-class status for our children, that we would always be controlled by somebody, whether it was governors, mayors, reform boards, whatever. And so, all these years, our group, along with other folks with the coalition would continue the fight and the struggle 'til we finally got what we wanted." Still, "the struggle is not over yet" (Moore 2019) Although Moore continues the vital, if often unacknowledged, work associated with grassroots organizing, including most recently agitating for a constitutional right to literacy for Black

children (Einhorn 2019), it is her efforts during the 1999 takeover that I will explore more closely in this section.

On September 13, 1999 Moore became the lead plaintiff in a suit filed in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan, that challenged the legality of both Public Act 10 and Public Act 23 – laws that suspended Detroit's duly elected school board, replacing them with an appointed School Reform Board (Washington 2000). In addition to Moore, the lawsuit's plaintiffs included the Baptist Ministers' Conference, The Black Slate, Inc., The Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action by Any Means Necessary, The Community Coalition for Empowerment, Inc., The Eastside Ministers United in Action, The Strike to Win Quality Education Caucus, United For Equality and Affirmative Action, The Westside Ministers Alliance, The Million Man Alumni Association, and KTV/NT – a coalition which consisted of 24 additional organizations altogether.

Communications circulated by KTV/NT describes the organization as representing "a broad spectrum of Detroit's activist community," and states that one of its principal objectives was to combat "Republican legislators, Governor Engler, Mayor Dennis Archer and some democrats, union leaders, corporations, such as New Detroit, Inc." who wanted to takeover DPS, not to "reform" the district, but "to steal the $1.5 billion bond money that Detroiters had recently passed" (Moore 1999)[16]. Thus, the struggle against takeover and school "reform," according to KTV/NT, relied on confronting a public-private coalition of actors – both white and Black – whose actions directly resulted in the unmaking of democratic school governance in Detroit and, by extension, the hollowing out of Black citizenship.

[16] This source was provided to the author by Moore.

Moore and other grassroots activists allege that Public Acts 10 and 23 strip Detroit citizens of their voting rights, and names four defendants, including the Detroit School Reform Board, David Adamany, Dennis Archer, and Governor John Engler. Specifically, Moore and the other plaintiffs charge defendants with "violating four separate constitutional and statutory provisions" (Washington 2000, 2). First, by enacting the law, defendants have denied the city's citizens the right to elect their local school board, and by extension the right to vote, violating the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution as well as provisions in the 1963 Constitution of the State of Michigan. Second, because the law only applied to Detroit, a majority Black school district, it violates the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965, given that it denies "the right to vote to citizens on account of their race." Moreover, according to the suit, this disenfranchising of Detroit's citizens is also a violation of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the US Constitution given its intention to "deprive" Blacks of the right to vote for their own school board on account of their race. Finally, despite being a local law, Public Act 10 was enacted without a two-thirds vote from the legislature or a city referendum, in violation, activists claimed, of the state's constitution.

Judge Nancy G. Edmunds, who presided over the case, ruled against Moore's group and other Black grassroots activists in October of 2000, arguing that the State of Michigan violated no laws, federal or state, in their takeover of DPS. The Plaintiffs had "no fundamental right to vote for members of a school board," according to the US District Judge, and failed to prove that Michigan's legislature purposely passed the statute "to discriminate on account of race" (Edmunds 2000, 13–14). Additionally, the School Reform Act did not violate the VRA because it only applies to "elective" and not "appointive processes" (Edmunds 2000, 13–14). In other words, because the School Reform Act created an appointed school board it did not violate the

rights of Black citizens because they weren't denied the right to vote in an elective process for that Board. The fact that the state legislature eradicated the "elective process" by removing the school board is legal based on a US Supreme Court ruling that held states can "avoid application of the Voting Rights Act by changing from an elective to an appointive process" (Edmunds 2000, 12). Finally, the judge rejected the argument by Moore and other plaintiffs that the School Reform Act was a local law, holding instead that it was enacted not only to affect Detroit, but any school district of 100,000 students or more. That DPS was the only school district of that size was irrelevant, Edmunds concluded, given that any school district that might eventually reach that size would also be subject to the law.

Moore and other local stakeholders appealed Edmunds' ruling to the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, but with little success. On June 12, 2002, the court affirmed Edmunds' decision, upholding her judicial logic. Once again, the Plaintiffs appealed their case, this time to the highest court in the land. The U.S. Supreme Court, however, refused to hear the case, allowing the rulings of the lower courts to stand. Despite the rulings, Moore is confident that these legal battles ultimately had a positive impact, influencing the 2005 vote by Detroit residents to return DPS to an elected board and bring an end to the state's educational takeover of the district (Moore 2019).

In addition to legal fights, grassroots resistance took other forms as well, especially direct-action tactics designed to disrupt school board meetings, halting proceedings activists deemed illegitimate. Lemmons describes some of these tactics, recalling that, during the "first takeover, there were constant protests, school board meetings being disrupted, people being arrested" (Lemmons 2019). Similarly, Moore notes the importance of these "fights" to the preservation of Detroit's public-school system. "Some of us," in KTV/NT, "maintained our

cause and stuck to it. And every time they dipped we bobbed. Broke up school board meetings, did a lot of stuff, got arrested. We never stopped. And, I think that's how, I'm not gonna say save the school system cuz we still ain't saved it yet, but we kept the school system goin. We didn't end up like the other school districts in the state of Michigan," alluding to the complete privatization of public school districts like Muskegon Heights in recent years (Moore 2019; Michigan Pubic Radio 2013).

Not all parents and school stakeholders, however, supported these confrontational tactics, or objected to the state's takeover scheme. For example, in 2002, protests exploded in responses to massive teacher layoffs announced by Burnley. On Wednesday, February 20th, roughly a thousand protesters packed into Martin Luther King High School, chanting "Keep the Vote! No Takeover" and singing "We Shall Overcome," intent on disrupting the school board meeting. About the protest, Moore noted that "now there will be no way anybody can say the people in Detroit are happy with this district" (Pratt 2002). Yet, some parents refused to participate in the protest at the board meeting, expressing disapproval of the protestor's tactics. As one parent saw it, the protest accomplished "nothing." "If the meeting is disrupted, you can't get the questions asked that you want answered" (Pratt 2002). This parent's seemingly pragmatic approach to the meeting, however, was a minority position amongst those present, with attendees instead seeking direct-actions tactics, disrupting the normal operations of the board as a way of challenging its legitimacy.

At the same time legal challenges and direct-action measures aimed at ending the takeover were occurring, Detroiters were mounting other forms of political resistance sparked by the state's DPS takeover. While still a state legislator, Lemmons decided to challenge Governor John Engler's political influence during the 2000 Presidential primary elections. A longtime

friend of George H.W. Bush and supporter of his son's presidential run, Governor Engler, according to the Washington Post, was "determined to use his power to bring [John] McCain's insurgent bid to a halt and play a key role in Bush's drive to the presidency" (Edsall 2000). Lemmons explains, "[a]fter the takeover…I was livid," but "there was little else we could do" to challenge it. Still, "one of my retaliatory responses to the takeover" was to organize Detroiters "to go into the Republican open primary and vote for John McCain over George W. Bush" (Lemmons 2019)

To accomplish this, Lemmons created a group in 2000 called Detroiters Out to Get Even with Governor Engler or D.O.G.G.-Engler, invoking an acronym he says was "a play on what was popular in hip-hop at that time" (Lemmons 2019). While it is difficult to measure the exact impact D.O.G.G.-Engler had on Michigan's 2000 Republican primary results, the elections' outcome lends credence to Lemmons' conclusion that they gave Engler a "spanking." Not only did McCain win Michigan's Republican primary, but the 13th congressional district, where Detroit is located and which Lemmons represents, also went to McCain, who collected 54% of that district's total vote, with Bush pulling in only 40%. In other words, the organization's objective, summarized by their popular slogan, was achieved: "Vote for John McCain so Engler will feel the pain" (Lemmons 2019).

CONCLUSION

Interviews with key stakeholders in the African-Centered school movement in Detroit, as well as long-time grassroots activists, reveal the myriad ways they challenged the state takeover, both discursively and politically. Moreover, interviewees offered alternative narratives of education "reform," describing state and corporate actions as designed to dismantle the district

for profit, rather than taking steps to improve educational performance or correct educational inequalities.

Grassroots leaders and stakeholders rejected the discursive construction of DPS as "failed," asserting that a school district with a budget surplus, rising test scores, a fresh infusion of bond money, and an annual budget of two billion dollars should be categorically characterized as a "success." As has been mentioned, removing the elected school board through the School Reform Act was seen by many residents as an infringement on a fundamental right long denied to African American citizens-the right to vote, and the subversion of a key component of democratic citizenship-equal participation in the political system.

CONCLUSION

RACIAL CAPITALISM AND THE ANTI-POLITICS MACHINE: RETHINKING SCHOOL "REFORM" AND BLACK POLITICS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

We have been conditioned to see the failure of Black men and boys as normal (Noguera 2013).

One could argue that the "reforms" the Mackinac Center and Gov. Engler set in motion were failures. Indeed, that it was what many African Americans in Detroit deeply committed to the education and liberation of the city's Black youth have argued. Even many reformers involved, some of whose intentions were no doubt honorable, have concluded that the first takeover of DPS was a "failure" (MCPP 2006). Yet, the failure may not be the most consequential outcome of reform.

Discussing "development," Ferguson remarks that "it may be that what is most important about a 'development' project is not so much what it fails to do but what it does do; it may be that its real importance in the end lies in the 'side effects'" (1994, 255). Exploring this issues of the "side-effects" of Western "development" interventions in the postcolonial world, Ferguson's regarding "side-effects" are instructive for this study of school "reform" in Detroit. He writes:

> If it is true that 'failure' is the norm for development projects…and that important political effects may be realized almost invisibly alongside with that 'failure,' then there may be some justification for beginning to speak of a kind of logic or intelligibility to what happens when the 'development' apparatus is deployed – a logic that transcends the question of planners' intentions. In terms of this larger unspoken logic, 'side effects' may be…seen as…effects that are at one and the same time instruments of what 'turn out' to be an exercise of power" (Ferguson 1994, 255).

Today, the "reform" discourse may well have the effect of producing what Frantz Fanon calls "Black skin" donning "white masks" both inside and out of the classroom (Fanon 2008). Thus, David Kirkland's observations about school testing seem applicable to the reform apparatus generally, and the Detroit takeover in particular. Writing about the "achievement gap,"

Kirkland argues that "however good, - or ill – intentioned the construct of the achievement-gap may be, its supposed urgency and its fierce repetition in the national discourse reinforces a particular kind of performance – one tied to promoting whiteness, one that mischaracterizes the true differential between white and non-white students" (Kirkland 2010). Indeed, the "reform" discourse does more than this, it obscures mechanisms of institutional oppression that have profited by unmaking public education in Detroit. The very invention of "choice," "charters," and "foundation grants" in Michigan were largely aimed at the state's African American community generally, and Black Detroit in particular.

TAKEOVER AND THE FUTURE OF BLACK POLITICS

The disproportionate targeting of Black and Latino school districts raises serious questions about the nature of the education reform movement and its long term consequences for the meaning and practice of citizenship for racialized minorities in the US. As Gary Orfield notes, "choice and other currently preferred interventions – high-stakes testing, accountability, and sanctions-are applied most extensively in poor nonwhite communities with schools highly segregated by race and poverty…the presumption is that since things are so bad in poor communities of color, policy makers should be free to impose their experiments there" (Orfield and Frankenberg 2013, 9). As DPS has shown, transforming Black school districts into zones of experimentation for new forms of social control and wealth extraction in the name of "reform," is bringing about a new articulation of Black citizenship.

Social equality is a defining characteristic of democracy, as is the concept of majority rule. Thus, members in a democratic country share a privileged status, that of democratic citizenship. According to Richard Bellamy citizenship is best understood as a political status, one which is comprised of three components: rights, belonging, and participation. As a result, all

citizens are not only equal members of the political community, in our case the US, but they are guaranteed the same set of rights and, finally, ensured equal participation in the nation's political, social, and economic decision-making processes (Bellamy 2008, 12). However, the school reform movement and specifically the takeover of DPS in 1999 has led to massive disenfranchisement of Black Americans. For example, Morel (2018, 61) found that only 24% of the time were elected school boards in majority-Black school districts allowed to remain in place after takeover. This compared to "46 percent of all cases where a majority-Latino student district has been taken over" (Morel 2018, 61). Moreover, in districts taken over by the state where white students represent the majority of the student population, "the board remains elected in 70 percent of cases" (Morel 2018, 61). This disparate treatment not only contradicts the essence of democratic equality, but it reveals a restructuring of Black citizenship and, as an extension, social relations under racial capitalism.

Takeovers have refashioned Black political rights, particularly the right to elect a board of education and, subsequently hold school officials accountable for their actions. This kind of disenfranchisement has also meant a loss of control over the direction of the local school system, which had long been a customary right celebrated by Americans. The increasing rise of educational czars, emergency managers, reform boards, oversight committees, charter schools, and other external interventions designed to expand "choice" and "reform" so-called "failed" districts has given rise to a bifurcated school system in the US. For many poor, Black families, performance of their public education systems has been used by elites to justify their exclusion from educational self-governance. In rolling back political rights and the ability to participate in local school governance, takeovers are changing the very nature of Black's social position within the hierarchical social structure in the US. Are Blacks today still (or, were they ever) full

members of the state's political community? If so, how what explains this disparate treatment within a democratic system? Should the right to self-governance be denied to cities or school districts that, as a result of poverty and structural racism, have at times been unable to produce outcomes equivalent to wealthy, white districts? These are just some of the enduring questions that scholars of Black politics and racial capitalism must grapple with today.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Research Design

Overview of Research Design

Through an analysis of an extended case study, the 1999 state takeover of DPS, I examine the neoliberalization of racial capitalism in Detroit and answer five interrelated questions that drive this dissertation. First, how did white elites construct Detroit's low-income Black students as a problem? Second, how did elites use discourse to manufacture Detroit as a failed district in need of reform? Third, what were the consequences of the state's takeover policies and practices on residents and key stakeholders in Detroit Public Schools? Fourth, how did residents and key stakeholders in Detroit's public-school system respond to the policies, practices, and narrative fueling the long, protracted discursive process of educational restructuring? And finally, how did public-school parents, teachers, school administrators, and students involved in the African-Centered School movement in Detroit negotiate, resist, acquiesce, and support the State's 1999 takeover of the district?

To interrogate these questions, I apply a multi-methods research design, which allows for the collection and analysis of robust data that can collectively comprise the case study (Creswell 2008, 14). The methods use in this study include the extended case study method, institutional ethnography, discourse and content analysis, in-depth interviews, and archival research. Together, these methods constitute this research design's distinct approach to the phenomenon of one type of educational restructuring: state takeovers of Black urban school districts.

Methodologies

Extended Case Study Method

The extended case study method is used to "relate conditions in a given case (organization, neighborhood, social event) to the society at large in which it is embedded" (Small 2009, 20) and "justifiably state that a particular process, phenomenon, mechanism, tendency, type, relationship, dynamic, or practice exists" (Small 2009, 24). Therefore, I examine state and local politics that

affected Detroit Public Schools (DPS) between 1990 and 2006 in order to capture both the antecedents and consequent impacts of the takeover on DPS. Case studies are important methods of organizing and defining cases (Gerring 2004, 341). For this dissertation, I apply the extended case study method to one case of state takeover – the 1999-2006 state takeover of DPS – and relate the conditions of that case to the broader restructuring of racial capitalism in the state since the 1990s. In doing so, this dissertation uncovers how Black educational dispossession is a central process driving the contemporary restructuring of racial capitalism in the neoliberal era.

Institutional Ethnography

In addition to the extended case study method, this study also uses the method of institutional ethnography to reveal how a set of institutions and actors worked in concert to construct Detroit Public Schools district as "failed." I have selected this method because, unlike many recent analyses of school reform in Detroit, I'm not so much concerned with those being "reformed" as those doing the "reforming." This methodological move allows me to transform the very project of reform, particularly state takeover itself, into an object of analysis to see how it structures social relations and ideas concerning education in Detroit. As Escobar correctly writes, institutions are "one of the most powerful forces in the creation of the world in which we live. Institutional ethnography is intended to bring to light this sociocultural pattern" (107).

There are several major institutional actors that this study will focus on, including the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, New Detroit Inc, Governor John Engler, Mayor Dennis Archer, and the Michigan Legislature to name a few. To examine these institutions and institutional actors I will draw on public documents, interviews, and institutional reports.

Discourse Analysis

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Geneva Smitherman became a pioneer in Critical Black Linguistics. She writes that, armed with the "intellectual background from the Black Tradition" she readily embraced "Critical Linguistics when it arrived upon the scene in the late 1970s," sharing the belief of those theorists that "the interconnections of language and society 'may be distorted out of vision,' and therefore a critical approach to language study will 'make visible the interconnections of things'" (Smitherman 2000, 7). Thus, building on the rich and insightful Black radical tradition, which itself had long been "critical" of power – race, class, gender, *and* language – in the US before an academic field of thought copyrighted the term, Smitherman clearly expresses the goal of this approach. Being a critical black linguist "means seeking not only to describe language and its socio-cultural rules, but doing so within a paradigm of language for social transformation" (2000b, 7-8). In other words, as leading Black Studies scholar Perry Hall notes, language must be analyzed with a goal towards social transformation (Hall 2004).

This approach to language developed by Smitherman forms an important, though not the only, component of the methodological framework developed here. In her more recent analysis of language use in the US, Smitherman and her co-author H. Samy Alim offer a particular approach to the study of language and power that is useful for this study. That method, which they refer to as "languaging race," provides an innovative way to examine "the politics of race through the lens of language" (Alim and Smitherman 2012, 3). The authors explain the political significance of this approach:

> Though language remains relatively unexamined by scholars of race and ethnicity, it plays a crucial role in the construction of racial and ethnic identities…'Language is often overlooked as an analytic concern in research on race, yet it is nonetheless central to how race is culturally understood'…In American public discourse, language is often overlooked as one of *the* most important cultural tools that we have for distinguishing ourselves from others.

> Language, no doubt, is a significant form of 'symbolic power.' Yet its central role in positioning each of us and the groups that we belong to along the social hierarchy lies largely beneath the average American's consciousness (Alim and Smitherman 2012, 3)

By "languaging race," this study embarks on a discursive approach to the political of education reform.

Scholars have defined discourse in varying ways, however, the present study does not see it as simply reducible to language or words. Instead, I understand a discourse "to be a structured, relational totality," that "delineates the terms of intelligibility whereby a particular 'reality' can be known and acted upon" (Doty 1996, 6). Thus, while discourse can refer to a body of texts or representations, it also refers to the social practices those representations are connected to, and the possibilities it creates or forestalls. This conceptualization of discourse is similar to political scientists Laffey and Weldes (2004) who define it as "structure and practices." They write that, structure, discourses are 'socio-cultural resources used by people' – and which use them – 'in the construction of meaning about their world and their activities' … As practice, they are structures of meaning-in-use" (2004, 28). Discourses shape meaning and action in the social world; in other words, "new ideas, objects, and practices" are brought into the world through an "interrelated body of texts," both written and spoken (Hardy, Harley, and Phillips 2004, 20). Using the method of discourse analysis offers a framework to examine education reform as a distinct, interrelated realm of thought and action, which is implicated in broader local, national, and global political struggles shaping contemporary urban space.

This dissertation uses a discursive approach to examine the production of educational reform and failure in Detroit. This method has been used by political anthropologists and historians to investigate "how certain representations become dominant and shape indelibly the ways in which reality is imagined and acted upon" (Escobar, 2011 5). By focusing on the

representational practices associated with this “colonization of reality,” discourse analysis draws attention to the dynamic nexus of language, power, and the social world. For this study, an analysis of elite discursive practice related to the takeover of DPS in 1999, and an empirical review of the processes of privatization during that period aims to make visible the practical and political consequences of the education reform discourse’s narration of DPS as “failed.” In other words, by thinking of education reform as more than “an area of theory and practice in which various policies have been enacted and theories formulated,” but rather “a realm of politics wherein the very identities of peoples, states, and regions are constructed through representational practices” (Doty 1996, 2), I illustrate how power functions through hegemonic discourses and practices, shaping social relations both within and outside of Detroit, enabling the possibility of distinct modes of domination and oppression, as well as resistance to them.

Similar to Arturo Escobar’s (2011, 5–6) important study of the emergence and consolidation of *development* in the post-World War II era, considering *education reform* “in terms of discourse makes it possible to maintain the focus on domination…and at the same time explore more fruitfully the conditions of possibility and the most pervasive effects of” reform. It allows us to step back from education reform, “bracketing its familiarity” so that we can analyze “the theoretical and practical context with which it has been associated” (Foucault qtd. in Escobar 2011, 6). This critical understanding of discourse compels us to reject the belief that language is neutral, or simply an objective reflection of reality, and instead see it as political, and integral to the construction of reality and a central site of social contestation.

Escobar’s work, and other political theorists who use the method of discourse analysis, builds on the scholarship of post-structuralist theorist Michel Foucault (1991, 27), who saw power and knowledge as deeply intertwined, asserting that no power relationships could exist

without “the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge,” nor knowledge that doesn’t assume and construct power relations” This finding implies that social problems are not natural or inevitable, but rather “historically contingent and dependent on power relations that have already rendered a particular topic a legitimate object of investigation” (Abrahamsen 2000, 14). Unearthing how education reform was rendered a legitimate topic and mode of school restructuring in Detroit and identifying the power relations that lie behind these representational practices is the central reason I have selected to use the method of discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis will be used to examine the archival data from Wayne State University, reports from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, speeches, public documents, and the data generated by in-depth interviews with key informants. Moreover, the method of content analysis will also be used to highlight new information that can help us better understand how and why discourses were constructed, and functioned, the way they did.

Archival Research

To investigate education reform and failure in Detroit, I analyze discourses specific to the 1999 state takeover of the city’s public-school system as represented in various sources, including print newspapers and archival data from Wayne State University. Given the importance of print news media as a central medium through which discourses are produced, circulated, and reproduced, I draw on newspaper articles to help locate and sketch out the discursive terrain of education reform developed by elites. The newspapers that were selected for this study were chosen because of their ideological orientation, focus, and reach. *The Detroit Free Press*, which is the most widely read newspaper in the metropolitan Detroit region, has a reputation for being more liberal than the city’s second most read newspaper, the *Detroit News*, and both will be used in this study, as well as *The Michigan Citizen,* a Black-owned newspaper that reflects Detroit’s working-class communities..

Accessing online databases containing articles from all of three newspapers, I conducted a keyword search using the compound phrase of "Detroit Public Schools" and "reform" to collect all articles published between January 1, 1997 and March 31, 1999. The time period covers the period right before Michigan's former Governor, John Engler, first declared his intention to takeover any urban school districts until right after the takeover of DPS occurred. After eliminating articles that are not relevant to the takeover or discussions of education reform in Detroit, I rigorously analyzed the remaining articles from each newspaper source, coding them for recurring themes, patterns, and signifying elements that can provide further insight into the representations and processes associated with public-school takeover and education reform in Detroit (Gibbs 2007; Saldaña 2009).

Discourse analysis was also used to analyze archival data collected from the Walter P. Reuther Archives at Wayne State University (WSU), specifically the papers and records of David Adamany, the first Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Detroit Public Schools Reform Board. I also examined the papers of William Beckham Jr., the president and CEO of both New Detroit, Inc. and the Skillman Foundation, while simultaneously serving as the Vice-Chairman of the Detroit Public Schools Reform Board. Both Adamany, as the former president of WSU, and Beckham, a leading Black figure in Detroit's business and philanthropic world, held immense institutional power, and their ideas disproportionately contributed to constructing a hegemonic belief about "reform" in Detroit.

In-Depth Interviews

Discourse analysis is particularly effective in examining how certain representations and social relations become hegemonic, it is also used to examine in-depth interviews (IDIs), which are themselves a method used to generate data that can help us understand how and why some parents and key stakeholders in DPS responded to state takeover in particular ways. IDIs are

designed to “generate data which give an authentic insight into people’s experiences (Crouch and McKenzie 2006, 485). By conducting interviews with key informants (KIs) at the Paul Robeson Malcolm X Academy (PRMXA) in Detroit, a public, African-Centered K-8 school in Detroit, we are better able to determine how local stakeholders understand and make sense of education reform in their communities. The school’s intentional embrace and promotion of African and African American history and culture provides a unique context and is one of the reasons for selection.

By selecting PRMXA, a public-school in Detroit affected by state takeover, and conducting IDIs with KI within and outside of the school who have a critical and/or comprehensive understanding of, and experience with, this mode of education reform, I shed light on the distinct ways Black Detroit residents engaged with the restructuring of DPS. PRMXA was selected because it is an African-Centered school – schools which, in Detroit, are the product of the 1980s African-Centered School movement. PRMXA also has a history of activism, both past and present, and therefore serves as a rich site to interrogate Black educational activism in Detroit.

For this study, KIs are defined as individuals who have a critical and/or comprehensive understanding of, and experience with, the 1999 takeover, including but not limited to educators and parents who have expressed and acted on their disagreement with the State’s takeover of DPS. Specifically, KI selected for inclusion in this study were based on at least one of the following criteria: 1) educators responsible for the daily instruction of children enrolled at the DPS school of study for at least one year during the 1999-2005 state takeover of the Detroit Public Schools district, 2) parents or guardians of a child enrolled in a DPS school for at least one year between 1999 and 2005, or 3) other individuals with important knowledge about the state takeover who are recommended by educators or parents/guardians from PRMXA. From this

population, a non-probabilistic, purposive sample of KIs were identified and recruited for participation in this study.

IDIs proceeded sequentially, where each subsequent interview “provides an increasingly accurate understanding of the question at hand” (Small 2009, 25), which for this study, concerns the ideas, variables, or mechanisms impacting local pubic-school stakeholders responses and understanding of education reform. With this approach, “the number of units (cases) is unknown until the study is completed; the collection of units is, by design, not representative; each unit has its own probably of selection; and different units are subject to different questionnaires” (Small 2009, 25). The number of units or interviews for this study cannot be determined beforehand, and proceeds on the recommendation by Guest et. al (2006, 65) that interviews should cease when data saturation is reached - the point where no new themes emerge from additional interviews. Although data saturation is the guiding principle for determining the number of interviews to be conducted in this study, Guest et. al (2006, 76) find twelve interviews are likely to be sufficient when seeking to identify “a shared perception, belief, or behavior among a relatively homogenous group.”

In total, thirteen key stakeholder interviews, achieved through the process of snowball sampling, were sufficient to reach a saturation point. These interviews provided different perspectives about the 1999 takeover of DPS and illustrate how actors, with similar and different interests, experienced and made sense of the education reform in Detroit. In Table 4 below I list the names, titles/roles and gender of each interviewee. That table also includes the interview dates for each KI. In total, interviews occurred between June 22, 2019 and September 20, 2019 – or roughly three months. In total, I interviewed nine women and four men whose positions ranged from educators to elected officials to grassroots orgnaizers.

Name	Title/Roles	Gender	Interview Date
Jeffrey D. Robinson	•Principal of PRMXA	M	6/22/19
Victor Gibson	•Retired DPS Teacher •Grassroots School Activist	M	7/26/19
Tanisha	•Fmr. Substitute Teacher •Academic Interventionist •Employed in DPS Central Office	F	8/31/19
Wilma Taylor-Costen	•Former Principal of Catherine C. Blackwell Institute of International Studies, Commerce and Technology (2000-2007) •Former Asst. Superintendent for Instruction for Primary Education (2007-2017)	F	8/12/19
Nicole Devezin	•DPS Teacher •DPS Sickout Organizer •Grassroots School Activist	F	8/19/19
Rachel	•Former Special Education Teacher in DPS	F	8/31/19
Welia Dawson	•PRMXA Teacher; •Co-Organizer of 2016 DPS Sickouts •Grassroots School Activist	F	8/22/19
Lamar Lemmons	•Former DPS Board Member •Former Michigan State Representative	M	8/21/19
Dr. John Talford	•Former DPS Superintendent (2012-2013) •Retired DPS Teacher •Grassroots School Activist	M	8/25/19
Ebony	•Former DPS high-ranking Official •Former Department Head in DPS Central Office	F	8/22/19
Helen Moore	•Back Parents for Quality Education, Founder •Keep The Vote/No Takeover, Founder •Grassroots Education Activist •Former President of Parent Teacher Association	F	9/20/19
Aliya Moore	•President of PRMXA PTA •DPS Parent •Grassroots School Activist	F	8/19/19
Stephanie Beal	•Former President of PRMXA PTA •DPS Parent •Grassroots School Activist	F	8/1/19

Table 4. List of Key Informants and Relevant Characteristics

In conducting these interviews, my objective was not to make descriptive claims about the distribution of responses to state takeover across the broader population of parents and

educators in DPS based on a sample of that population. As Small (2009, 25) notes, while sampling logic is "superior when asking descriptive questions about a population; case study logic is probably more effective when asking how or why questions about processes unknown before the start of the study." Therefore, following Small's observation that case study logic "can be effectively applied to in-depth interview-based studies" (24), I use sequential interviewing and snowball sampling, starting at PRMXA, to develop a theory about the mechanisms that influence local resistance to public-school takeover. The goal is not to argue that a certain percentage of parents/guardians, teachers, or school officials resisted or supported takeover, but rather to uncover the ways and reasons various types of responses emerged to this reform policy.

In using methods similar to Eve Ewing's recent award-winning *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*, which also draws from twelve interview to examine the impact of school closings in a neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, there are particular limitations. A small number of interviews have limitations in terms of their ability to reflect the perspectives of a broader population; asking people to reflect on events instead of interviewing them during the takeover period also means that we are relying on memory instead of direct, real-time responses. And like Ewing, I contacted my interviewees "through snowball sampling, so some of the participants I interviewed have social ties to one another." What she goes on to say is important for this study: "Their perspectives, as I present them, are in no way intended to be exhaustive or necessarily representative of average attitudes in the population. Rather, I intended to draw on their responses to construct a theoretical framework that I believe has broader applicability, in the hope that it illuminates something fundamental about the social process they experience" (Ewing 2018, 183). With this in mind, interviews were systematically analyzed and coded for recurring

themes, issues, and concerns that helped uncover how and why some key stakeholders in DPS resisted, negotiated, or acquiesced to the State's move to restructure the public-school district.

The decision to conduct IDI with KIs beginning at PRMXA was guided by the school community's notable embrace of African American history and culture as an African-Centered school, as well as its involvement in recent protests against school takeover efforts (Lewis and Kozlowski 2016). This follows the case study logic described above and methods pursued in other studies examining Black resistance to neoliberal urban education reform. For example, Kristen L. Buras interviewed members of the Frederick Douglass High School community in New Orleans, including teachers and alumni, about their struggle against school privatization in the City and their actions to uphold the school's rich African American legacy and secure greater resources for the school. Buras argues that she selected this school because it provided a "striking case study of resistance to current reforms and their costs" (Buras 2015, 144). Rejecting critiques of selection bias associated with small-N studies, especially those consisting of one case, political scientists Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett write that "[c]ases selected on the dependent variable, including single-case studies, can help identify which variables are not necessary or sufficient conditions for the selected outcome" (2005, 23). Thus, PRMXA, like Buras' Frederick Dougalss High School, was selected as an interview site because of its potential to discover those conditions or factors that influence resistance to education reform through interviews with KIs.

To be sure, not all informants fit only in one of these categories. For example, Stephanie Beal was not only a school activist, but she was also a parent. Similarly, as noted above, Welia Dawson was both a teacher and a school activist. Indeed, the nature of school politics in Detroit

is that many of these KI occupied multiple roles and therefore were able to provide nuanced insights into the reform process unfolding in Detroit.

Interviews lasted between one to four hours and the majority of interview occurred at PRMXA. However, other interviews occurred at the homes of former teachers, the Redford Public Library in metro-Detroit, and the Dexter Elmhurst Community Center in Detroit. I focused my questions on the experiences of parents/guardians, educators, activists, or political officials with state takeover, what their views of takeover were before and after its implementation, how they responded to takeover, and what factors influenced those responses. For example, parents/guardians were asked: "You told me about some of the effects of the takeover. Were you involved in any organizations or activities that were intended to promote or challenge the 1999 takeover?" Educators, for example, were asked: "How would you describe the takeover of Detroit in 1999? Based on your opinion and experience, what happened?" A copy of the interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCAL

INTRODUCTION

Before we begin, I would like to let you know that I am conducting interviews as part of a broader research project for my dissertation, which looks at how and why the State of Michigan took control of Detroit Public Schools in 1999 and in 2009, and examines how local residents and key stakeholders in the district responded to these takeovers. For our interview, I am interested in understanding the different ways parents, educators, school administrators, and students in DPS responded to the State's takeover of the district in both 1999 and 2009?

But before we get into all that, I'd first like to learn a little more about you.

1. Can you tell me where you were born?
    a. If not Detroit: When did you move to Detroit?
    b. Detroit: What was it like growing up in Detroit and how has the city changed over your lifetime?

2. What positions have you held in Detroit Public Schools?

3. What do you remember about DPS before the first state takeover of the district in 1999?

4. How were students performing academically in the district at that time? (i.e. before the takeover?)

SHIFT TO 1999 TAKEOVER

Now I want to shift focus a little bit and ask you about your experience and memory of the first state takeover of DPS in 1999. I'm specifically interested in knowing how local educators and parents responded to the state's first takeover of DPS and also what impact you think this takeover had on DPS.

5. What do you remember about the first takeover of DPS?

6. How did Detroiters respond to the takeover? Did you see a need for this takeover? How did you respond?

7. I also want to understand why the takeover occurred in the first place. In your view, why did the state takeover DPS in 1999?
    a. Was any person(s) or group(s) responsible?

8. How big of a role do you think race played in the 1999 takeover? Do you think race influenced people's support or disagreement with the takeover?

9. How big of a role do you think economic circumstances played in the state's decision to takeover DPS in 1999? Do you think these circumstances influenced people's support or disagreement with the takeover?

SHIFT TO 2009 TAKEOVER

Now I want to move to the second part of the interview. Here I will ask a few questions about your experience and memory of the second state takeover of DPS in 2009 or what is often called Emergency Financial Management or Emergency Management. Again, I'm specifically interested in knowing why educators and parents resisted or supported Emergency Management of DPS, and why some people may not have gotten involved at all. These questions are also meant to understand what impact you believe EM had on DPS.

10. Based on your experience and opinion, how did Emergency Management effect DPS?
    a. What effect did EM have on parents and children?

11. In your opinion, how supportive were residents of Emergency Management?

    a. Why do you think that was?
    b. How did people show their support/disagreement?

12. What did you think about the state's decision to put DPS under the control of an Emergency Manager?

13. Are there any particular events or moments during Emergency Management that standout in your mind or affect how you think about that period?

14. I also want to get a sense of why Emergency Management occurred in the first place. In your view, why did the state takeover DPS in 2009?
    a. Was any person(s) or group(s) responsible?

15. How big of a role do you think race played in the 2009 Emergency Management of DPS? Do you think it influenced people's support or disagreement with Emergency Management?

16. How big of a role do you think economic circumstances played in the state's decision to takeover DPS in 2009? Do you think these circumstances influenced people's support or disagreement with the takeover?

SHIFT TO CONCLUSION

I am now at the conclusion of the interview and only have a few questions left. These questions are about your views of the general changes in Detroit's education system and an opportunity for you to tell me about any issues we didn't talk about.

CONCLUSION

17. What do you think about the idea of replacing public schools in Detroit with charter schools?

18. Is there anything I didn't ask you about the takeovers or about public schooling in Detroit that you think is important?

19. Would you be willing to put me in touch with other people who were working for or against Emergency Management—or who were otherwise affected by the takeover so that I might understand more about its impacts on local communities?

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