

# Making Sense of Renaissance 2010 School Policy in Chicago: Race, Class, and the Cultural Politics of Neoliberal Urban Restructuring

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## **Introduction**

Chicago has long been a focus of national attention on urban education policy, and its latest plan to remake public education is no exception. In 2004, Chicago's mayor announced Renaissance 2010 (Ren2010), a plan to close 60-70 schools and reopen 100 new schools, at least two-thirds as charter or contract schools. Charter schools are public schools chartered by the state to be run by private group. They have greater autonomy in operation and curriculum than CPS schools. Renaissance 2010 is perhaps the most significant experiment in the US to reinvent an urban public school system on neoliberal lines. Part of the Ren2010 agenda is to create new mixed-income schools in mixed-income communities created in the wake of the demolition of public housing.

In 2000, Chicago launched a \$1.6 billion transformation of public housing – the Plan for Transformation (PFT). One of the most extensive revamps of public housing in the USA, the PFT has nearly completed demolition of 22,000 units, including all the remaining “family” units of three, four, or five bedrooms. On paper, most are to be renovated or replaced, many as mixed-income developments (Bennett, Smith & Wright, 2006b). However, some researchers estimate less than 20% of former residents will be able to return to these new developments (Wilén & Nayak, 2006; Venkatesh, 2004).

Viewed through the lens of neoliberal urbanism, the PFT is part of a development agenda which merges local, national, and transnational capital, in partnership with city government, to make Chicago a first tier global city (Lipman, 2004). The heart of that plan is downtown development, tourism, and gentrification of large sections of working-class and low-income Chicago, particularly communities of color (see Demissie, 2006). The city's aggressive support for capital accumulation and corporate involvement in city decision-making extends to incentives to developers and corporate and financial interests, public-private partnerships, the

city's bid for the 2016 Olympics, cuts in funding for social welfare, control of labor, and privatization of public assets.

I focus on the intersection of education policy and neoliberal urban development through a case study of Chicago. I briefly summarize ways in which Renaissance 2010 is implicated in the neoliberal restructuring of the city. Ren2010 is a market-based approach that involves a high level partnership with the most powerful financial and corporate interests in the city. In the context of globalization (Sassen, 2006), neoliberal economic restructuring (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 2005), and the cultural politics of race (Barlow, 2003), school policy is shaped by and shapes urban economic, spatial, and demographic transformations. (See Lipman, 2008; Lipman & Haines, 2007 for more in-depth discussion of this point.) My focus in this paper is the cultural politics of this policy, how it “makes sense” on the ground and how neoliberalism is materialized through the actions of social movements and social actors. Here, I am interested in a) the discourse of racial pathology underpinning mixed-income schools/housing and b) rearticulation of discourses of equity and self-determination to the market and individual choice through charter schools. I am especially interested in how the “good sense” in these policies connects with people’s lived experiences to further a hegemonic neoliberal agenda and the implications for constructing a counter-hegemonic movement.

I want to clarify at the outset that I am not claiming a simple correspondence or determinist relationship between neoliberal urban development and education. The process is dialectical and contested and there are local histories, specific relations of social forces, micropolitics in schools and cities, and ideological complexities. Moreover, there is a certain amount of what Stephen Ball (1994) calls “ad hockery” in the creation of education policy at all levels. Nevertheless, neoliberalism is a dominant force in shaping education in the US and globally, and education policy works to materially and ideologically consolidate neoliberal policy. I examine Chicago as a case study to explore this relationship in a specific context and to

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advance a broad argument grounded in the assumption that we cannot analyze education policy outside this larger framework, while also accounting for complexity.

I take a multidisciplinary approach to urban political economy and education, drawing from critical urban sociology, critical geography, urban policy and planning, and sociology of education. In particular, I find helpful Gramsci's (1971) elaboration of the role of ideology and culture in the construction of hegemony. My analysis draws on public archival data, data produced by community organizations, and interview and participant observation data collected since 2004 at numerous community and school board meetings, community forums, activist coalition meetings, public events sponsored by Ren2010, press conferences, and meetings with CPS officials. Interviews with parents, teachers, administrators, school staff, and students for a study on the effects of school closings in the Midsouth area of Chicago (Lipman, Person, & KOCO, 2007) also inform my analysis.

I begin with a summary of neoliberal urbanism and Chicago's Ren2010 education policy. From there I move on to discuss cultural politics of this policy. First, I examine culture of poverty discourse as ideological underpinning for mixed-income schools and housing. Then I offer an initial analysis of the cultural politics of charter schools, particularly ways in which they resonate with people's lived experiences and historical struggles for self-determination. Finally, I offer some thoughts on how this analysis might help frame a counter-neoliberal educational agenda.

### **Neoliberal urbanism**

Brenner and Theodore (2002) argue that "cities have become strategically crucial geographic arenas in which a variety of neoliberal initiatives...have been articulated" (p.351). Despite neoliberal theory of reduced government, Harvey (2005), Brenner & Theodore (2002), Hackworth (2007), and others contend that "actually existing neoliberalism" involves the active intervention of the state on the side of capital, first to destroy existing institutional arrangements,

and then to create a new infrastructure to facilitate capital accumulation through intensified exploitation of labor and privatization of social infrastructure and institutions. Peck and Tickel (2002) describe the two phases as “roll back” and “roll out” neoliberalism. Roll back neoliberalism involves destruction of Keynesian artifacts (e.g. public housing, fully funded public schools), policies (e.g., redistributive welfare, labor protections), agreements (e.g., federal redistribution of revenue to cities), and institutions (e.g., Dept. of Housing and Urban Development) (see Hackworth). Roll out neoliberalism then creates new practices and institutions or reconstructs existing ones.

Beginning in the 1970s, roll-back neoliberalism reduced federal funding for cities, pushing city governments to cut back public services and disinvest in public institutions and infrastructure. Driven by market ideologies, roll out neoliberalism replaced these institutions with public- private ventures, municipal tax laws that subsidize development,<sup>i</sup> and privatization of public services as a way to make up for federal funding shortfalls. These policies tilt governance and ownership of public institutions toward private interests (N. Smith, 2002), undermine democratic participation, and produce the “democratic deficits” that characterize neoliberal governance (Fraser, forthcoming)..

Neoliberalization of cities is also driven by economic globalization and deregulation which has weakened the tight coupling of urban and national economies that characterized the industrial era. As cities compete directly in the global economy for international investment, tourism, highly skilled labour, and production facilities, including the producer services that drive globalization (Sassen, 2006), marketing cities and specifically their housing and schools has become a hallmark of urban development. Downtown luxury living and gentrified neighborhoods, as well as new “innovative” schools in gentrified communities and choice within the public school system, are located in this inter-city competition (Lipman, 2004).

Facilitated by municipal government, gentrification has become a pivotal sector in neoliberal urban economies (Feinstein, 2001; Hackworth, 2007; Smith, N., 2002) and a critical element in the production of spatial inequality, displacement, homelessness, and racial containment. “Gentrification as a global urban strategy is a consummate expression of neo-liberal urbanism. It mobilizes individual property claims via a market lubricated by state donations and often buried as regeneration” (N. Smith, 2002, p.446). As cuts in federal funding pushed cities to rely more on property tax revenues, cities have become more dependent on, and subsidizers of the real estate market through public giveaways of land and subsidies that funnel public tax dollars to developers. Real estate development is a key speculative activity with properties operating as financial instruments. Speculation, in turn, causes increases in property values and rising property taxes, driving out low-income and working-class renters and home owners. This cycle of redevelopment and displacement is located in what Harvey (2001) calls the “spatial fix:” “Capitalism perpetually strives, therefore, to create a social and physical landscape in its own image and requisite to its own needs at a particular point in time, only just as certainly to undermine, disrupt and even destroy that landscape at a later point in time” (p.333).

Within this urban dynamic, Hackworth (2007) argues that the “inner city” has become a site of extreme transition and “soft spot” for neoliberal experimentation. An icon of vilified Keynesian welfare state policies (e.g., subsidized public housing, public health clinics and public hospitals), the inner city is now a focus of “high profile real estate investment, neoliberal policy experiments, and governance changes” (p.13). Areas of the central city that were home to low-income communities of color, are foci of public-private partnerships, gentrification complexes, privatization, and de-democratization through mayoral takeovers of public institutions and corporate-led governance bodies. This context defines the stakes involved in creating schools to

market new mixed-income developments to the middle class as well as to legitimate what community residents I have interviewed in Chicago call a “land grab.”

### **Centrality of race to neoliberal urban development**

Structural and ideological racism opens up central city areas to neoliberal projects. Andrew Barlow (2003) notes, “In the United States, the 400-year legacy of highly organized, state-sponsored systems of racism have great significance for the ways in which the ‘grid’ of globalized relationships come into being”(p.9). Post-World War II and post-Keynesian government policies of the early 1980s, investment decisions, and a climate of police coercion produced white flight, disinvestment in infrastructure (including public housing and schools), deindustrialization, and physical decay of the built environment as well as unemployment and the elimination of social services and decline of community institutions (Lipsitz, 1998). These policies reduced real estate values in inner cities creating a rent gap that set conditions for gentrification and provided grounds to demolish public housing, and transfer public schools to the market. The cultural politics of race provide the ideological soil for a racially coded neoliberal ideology of individual responsibility and reduction of “dependency” on the state as grounds to restructure or eliminate government funded social programs and institutions.

### **Intersection of neoliberal urbanism and education: the Chicago context**

Under Renaissance 2010, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), by fall 2008, will have closed, phased out, or consolidated 51 schools between 2002 and 2008 and opened up 82 schools which it claims under Renaissance 2010. Since the start of Ren2010 in 2004-05, CPS has opened up 56 charter, 4 contract, 18 performance, and 5 military schools. Centralized accountability without resources laid the groundwork. Just as disinvestment produces decline in public housing and legitimates demolition, disinvestment in schools becomes an argument for closing them. Then accountability measures provide the tools to identify schools to be closed. At the same time, a racialized discourse of failure, probation, and lack of effort that was central to

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the 1995 school reform constructs African American and Latino schools and communities as deficient.

Chicago's school policies are an integral part of the neoliberal urban agenda (Lipman, 2008). Ren2010 is a pillar of the city's corporate/financial plan: The plan for Ren2010 was proposed by the Commercial Club of Chicago CCC), an organization of the city's most powerful corporate, financial, and civic leaders (Left Behind, 2003), and Mayor Daley announced it at a CCC event. Ren2010 is a high-level public private partnership with the CCC's Renaissance Schools Fund participating in selecting, evaluating, and funding Ren2010 schools. The GATES foundation funds the Ren2010 high school initiative; and corporate charter school companies are running schools. The significance of the growth of Charter schools as a form of marketization of public education is reflected in the comments of Andrew J. McKenna (Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago: "Chicago is taking the lead across the nation in remaking urban education. No other major city has launched such an ambitious public school choice agenda."

The power of Ren2010 is also discursive. It further rearticulates the purpose of public institutions to discourses of efficiency and accountability initiated with Chicago's 1995 accountability policy in which education is reduced to test scores. But the rationale for closing schools under Ren2010 strengthens this discourse as test scores and cubic feet of capacity compared with enrollments become the measures to determine that schools will be closed, regardless of what is actually happening in the schools (see Greenlee et al, 2008). Closing neighbourhood schools in working class communities of color is reduced to a cost-benefit analysis.

Further, Ren2010 undermines democratic governance of schools by creating charter schools governed by appointed boards with no accountability to parents and communities. For

charters run by corporate charter companies this means capital gains a direct role in the governance of public institutions. Ren2010 eliminates democratically elected Local School Councils (LSCs) comprised primarily of parents and community members. Their significance extends beyond schools because LSCs are really the only grass roots, democratically elected body with decision making power in public institutions in the city. LSC members are the largest body of elected people of color in the US. The contest over school governance is essentially a struggle around how competence to participate in democratic public life is defined. In this sense, when they are at their best, LSCs play an important pedagogical role. They develop collective capacities of people to engage in democratic governance and control of community institutions. Michael Katz points out that by redistributing power to parents and community representatives, LSCs “asserted the capacity of ordinary citizens to reach intelligent decisions about educational policy” (Katz, 1992, p. 62). Moreover, all charter and contract schools are non-union.

The process of closing schools epitomises democratic deficits of neoliberal policy, as public “hearings” are in fact merely performances with decisions made in advance, school deliberations held in private, and public notification perfunctory at best. For example, while CPS state that decisions to “turn around” five schools by turning them over to the Gates Foundation funded Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) would be based on public hearings and then voted on in a School Board meeting on February 27, 2008, the AUSL website advertised 100 teaching positions in these schools, and closed the application date on February 20, before the board met. Interviews with people in schools closed under Ren2010 in the Midsouth reflect the disregard for school and community members as decisions are made elsewhere:

*: “...nobody down here was really taken into account when they were doing it [closing the school]. No one in this community was supposed to even know about it until it was time to slap it on us.” (Interview with school support staff, December 2006).*

*“We were not informed a month ahead of time. It was like a couple of weeks. And we were not informed by word of mouth. We had a flier. Basically, it was like this. Read this. Take it home and read it. And I mean, it’s like, it’s closing and there’s nothing we can do about it. No voting, no taking a stand or nothing. This is law. ..And that was like a couple weeks before school was actually out, so they didn’t give us time to prepare ourselves, prepare our children, you know, where [are] they going to go?”* (Interview with parent, December 2006).

Finally, Renaissance 2010 supports gentrification. Facilitated by municipal government, gentrification has become a pivotal sector in neoliberal urban economies (Fainstein, 2001; Hackworth, 2007; Smith, N., 2002) and a critical element in the production of spatial inequality, displacement, homelessness, and racial containment. “Gentrification as a global urban strategy is a consummate expression of neo-liberal urbanism. It mobilizes individual property claims via a market lubricated by state donations and often buried as regeneration” (N. Smith, 2002, p.446). As cuts in federal funding pushed cities to rely more on property tax revenues, cities have become more dependent on, and subsidizers of the real estate market through public giveaways of land and subsidies that funnel public tax dollars to developers. Real estate development is a key speculative activity with properties operating as financial instruments. Speculation, in turn, causes increases in property values and rising property taxes, driving out low-income and working class renters and home owners. As cities compete directly in the global economy (Sassen, 2006), marketing cities and specifically their housing and schools has become a hallmark of urban development. Downtown luxury living and gentrified neighborhoods, as well as new “innovative” schools in gentrified communities and choice within the public school system, are located in this inter-city competition (Lipman, 2004).

This is facilitated by decades of disinvestment and a huge rent gap in some of the most attractive locations in the city -- what critical geographers call “creative destruction” of the urban built environment -- to create new opportunities for speculative investment. The result is social dislocation and intensification of socio spatial polarization.

This defines the stakes involved in creating schools to market new mixed-income developments to the middle class as well as to legitimate what community residents I have interviewed call a “land grab.” Indeed, housing and education policies are critical to Chicago’s bid to be a first-tier global city and to develop its economy on neoliberal lines.

The city markets “innovative” schools as anchors in gentrified and gentrifying communities. Schools are seen by the Mayor and the CEO of CPS as a cornerstone of the return of middle-class families (Olszewski & Sadovi, 2003). The MacArthur Foundation underscores the importance of schools in mixed-income developments: “The city has made a commitment to improving the local schools, without which the success of the new mixed-income communities would be at great risk.” (2005). Closing schools in low-income communities of color under Ren2010, reopening new schools with new identities, is part of rebranding these neighbourhoods. For example, the University of Chicago is running several charter schools in a gentrifying area; CPS has opened several Montessori schools to attract middle class parents, and the latest round of school closings led to the replacement of several neighbourhood schools serving working class students of color with selective enrollment, high-status magnet schools.

Ren2010 was launched with the Midsouth Plan to Close 20 of 22 schools in the Midsouth. The fate of this plan was tied to the Chicago Housing Authority’s \$1.6 billion transformation of public housing, most of it on the South Side. In this targeted area, which stretches from 31st Street on the north and 47th Street on the south and from Lake Michigan to the Dan Ryan Expressway, the CHA plans to create five mixed-income communities with 8,000 new homes--one-third of them reserved for public housing, although research suggests far

fewer residents will actually be relocated to these developments (Venkatesh, 2004; Wilen & Nyack, 2006). Terry Mazany, CEO the Chicago Community Trust (a local corporate foundation) was quoted as saying about this area: “We have the housing and the retail, now all we need is the third leg, the schools.” (cite)

While new schools are part of rebranding the area, closing schools pushes out existing residents. Schools are centers of community. When they are closed it destabilizes the community. My qualitative data from the Midsouth are rich with stories of several children in a family being transferred to different schools under Ren2010. These transfers disrupted the lives of working parents and posed significant threats to children’s safety as well as producing a climate of uncertainty as schools were closed (Lipman, Person, KOCO, 2007). In the Midsouth, in some cases children were sent to as many as four different schools in three years.

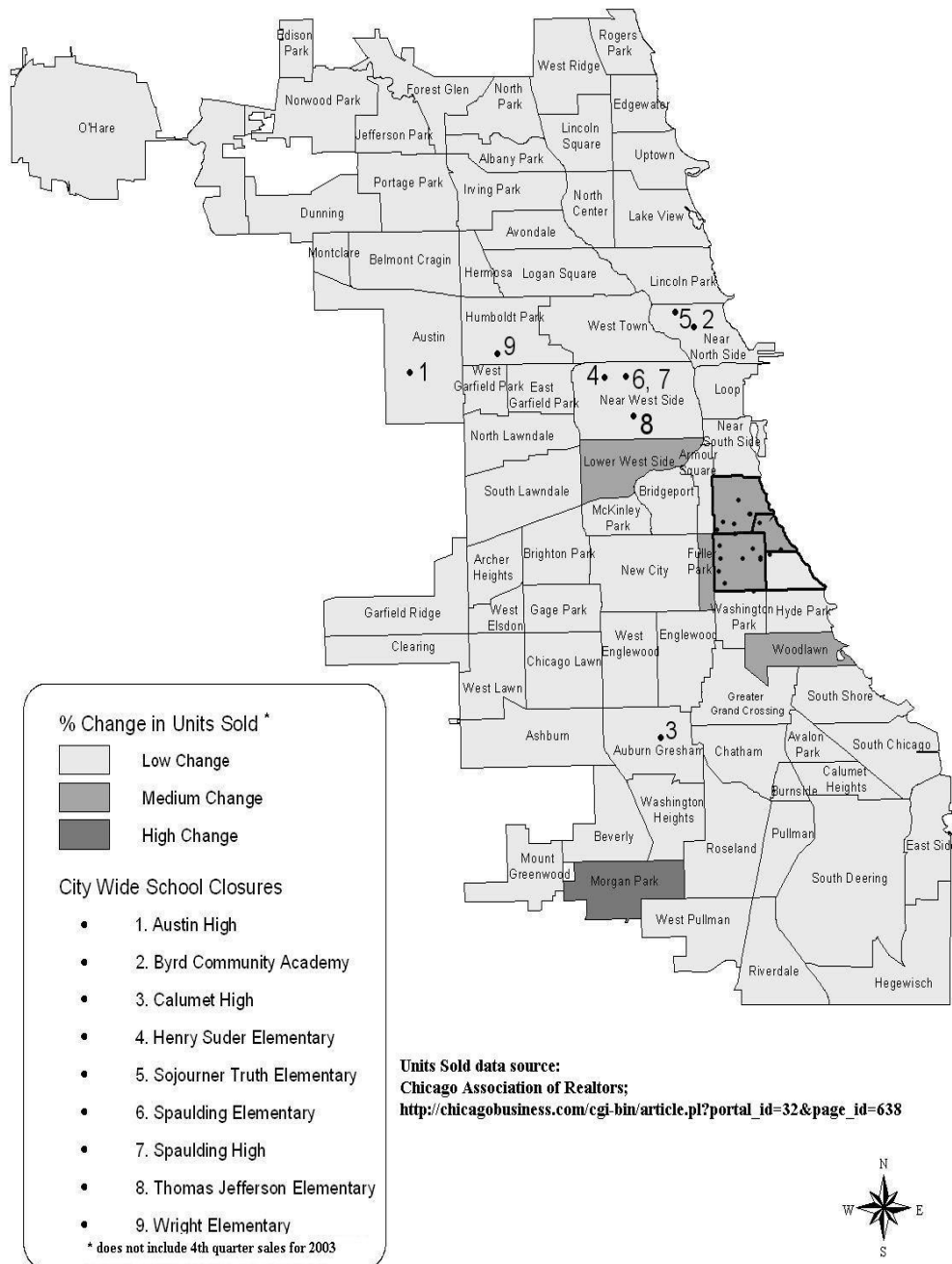
Community members insisted that the Midsouth Plan was designed to further the gentrification of their community (Lipman & Haines, 2007). The same charge was prevalent in protests against closing Collins High School on the West side, which CPS closed in 2006 and rebirthed as a charter school under Ren2010. Collins is around the corner from \$450,000 condominiums and in one of the most attractive parks in the city. At the time CPS announced plans to close Collins, MCL Companies and Brownstone Construction were planning to build two and three-bedroom condominiums priced between \$250,000 and \$600,000 at the intersection of Roosevelt and Campbell, about one-half mile from Collins. Initial plans called for 245 homes (cite).

The community claim that gentrification is implicated is supported by looking at where schools were closed. Maps #1 and #2 below indicate the concentration of proposed school closings in relation to two indicators of gentrification: Percent Change in Housing Units Sold and Percent Change in Housing Price.<sup>ii</sup> The area outlined on the maps is the Midsouth. Maps#3

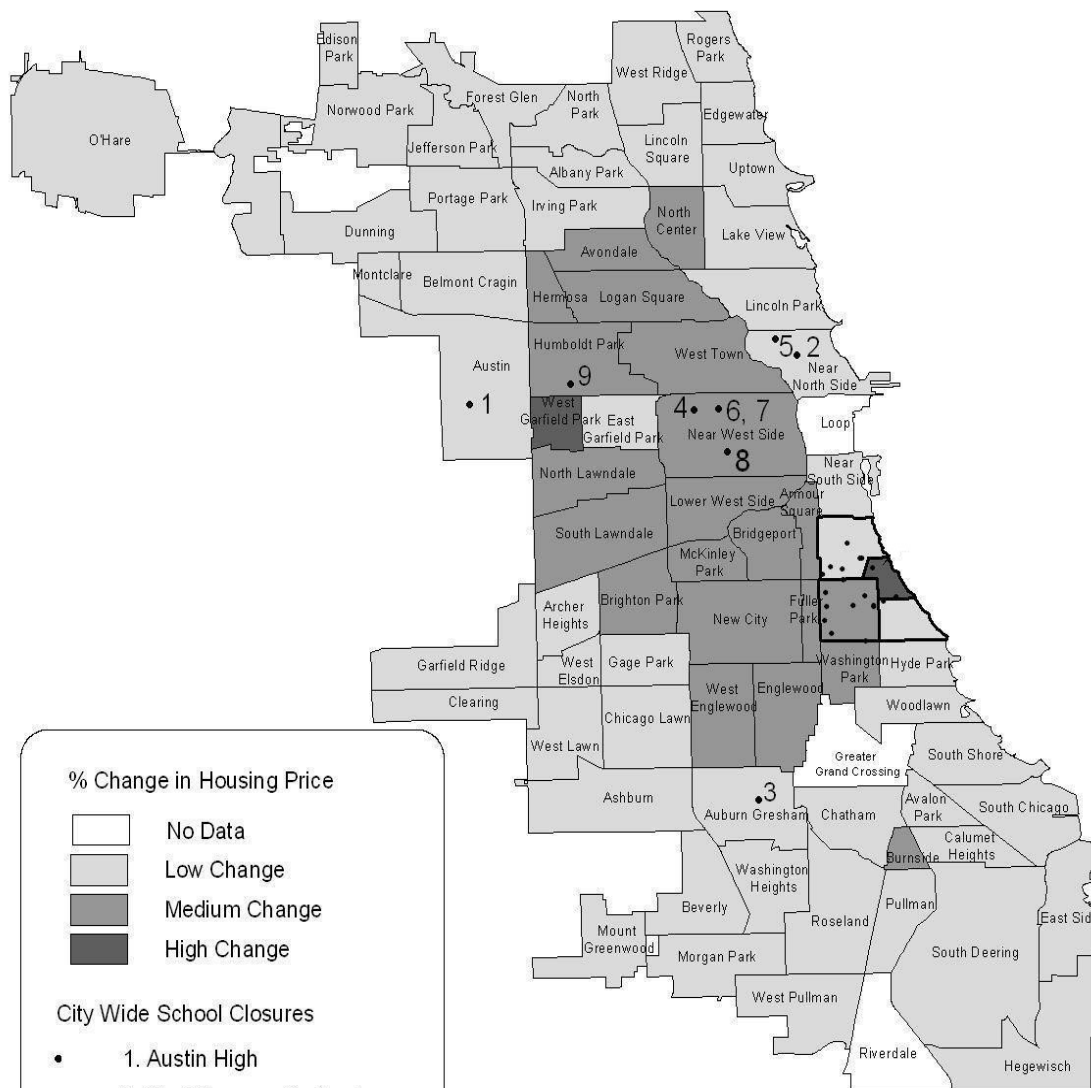
and #4 show the location of schools closed in relation to Percent Change in Median House Prices 2002-2004 and 2004-2006. One way to interpret these maps is that closing schools (serving low-income students of color) may either be a selling point to attract investors and initial buyers to a gentrifying area, or it may be a way to attract home buyers to an area already gentrified with the promise of new schools replacing the old.

Ren2010 thus plays a significant role in displacement, gentrification, and the exclusion of working class and low-income people of color who are being pushed to the city outskirts and beyond (Lipman & Haines, 2007). Although cast as a positive strategy for urban decay and the achievement of social stability, present-day gentrification is driven by finance capital at multiple scales and is a means for the middle and upper- middle classes to claim cultural control of the city (Feinstein, 2001; Hackworth, 2007; Smith, 1996). The class and race nature of this process is, as Neil Smith points out, hidden in the language of “mixed income communities” and “regeneration.” A global city driven by neoliberal economic and social policies simply has no room for public housing as devised in the 1950s and 1960s or for low-income African Americans who are, from the standpoint of capital, largely superfluous in the new economy, “threatening” to corporate and tourist culture, and sitting on what has become very valuable land. This defines the stakes involved in closing schools and lcreating schools to market new mixed-income developments.

# Percent Change in Housing Units Sold 2000-2003



# Percent Change in Housing Price 1993-2003



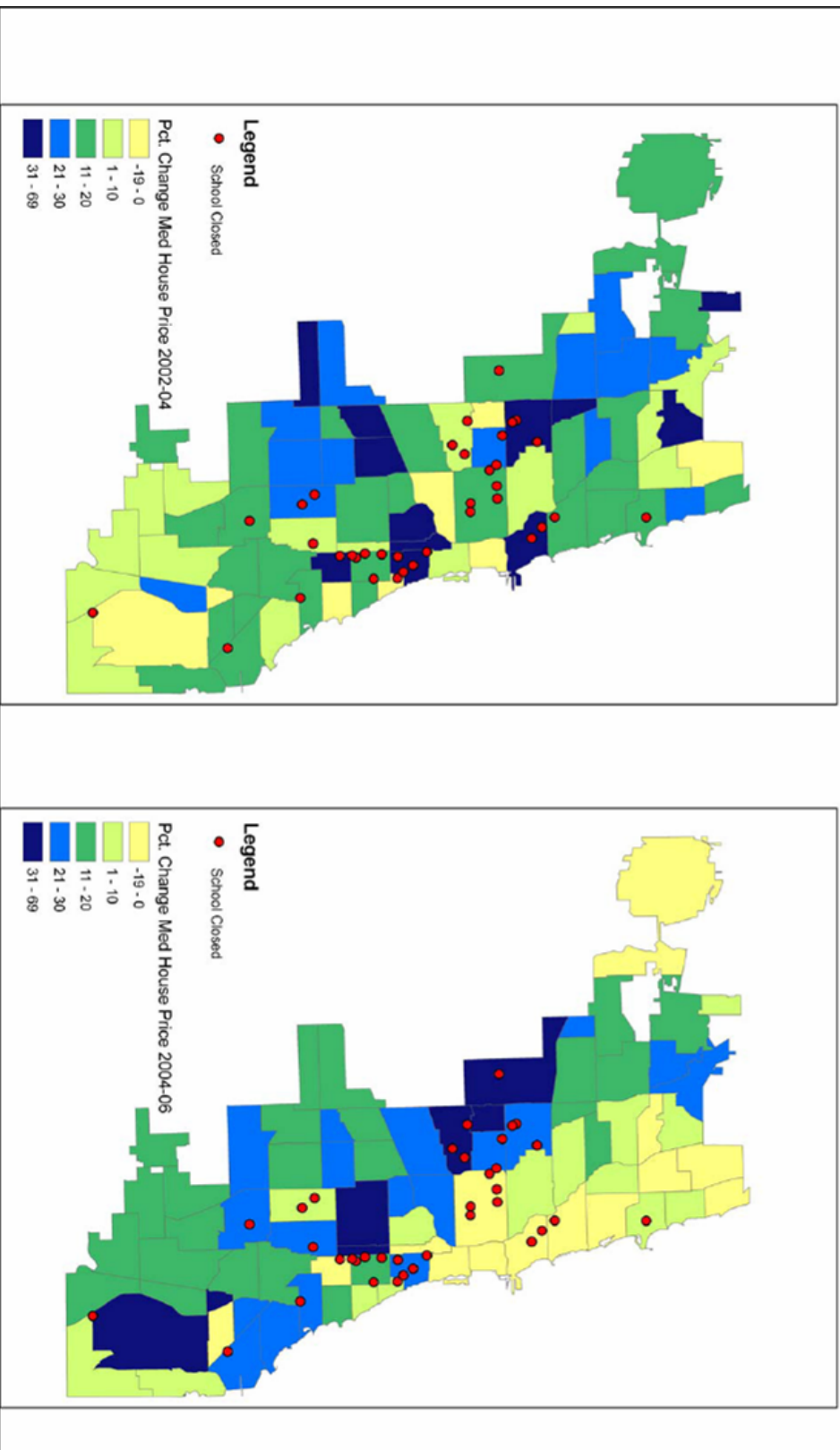
**Housing Value data source:**  
Greater Chicago Housing and Community Development;  
[www.chicagoareahousing.org/Query\\_Intro.asp](http://www.chicagoareahousing.org/Query_Intro.asp)

Housing price data adusted for inflation





# Schools closed 2001-2007 Percent Change Median House Prices 2002-2004 2004-2006



Although, I do not have space to discuss the resistance to these policies, it is important to note that there has been fierce opposition in the communities affected since 2004, including several city-wide coalitions that included community organizations, unions, school reform groups, an organization for the homeless, and progressive teacher organizations (see Lipman & Haines, 2007). But now I turn to how these policies win adherents among the public, including some whose interests are inherently opposed to neoliberal development.

### **Cultural politics of Renaissance 2010**

In this section I discuss the cultural politics of neoliberal education policy, how relations of power are defined and contested through discourses, ideologies, and everyday practices. This analysis attends to the powerful role of symbols, discourses, and ideologies to reframe issues and generate consent for hegemonic policies. It also points to the central role of ideology in developing a counter-hegemonic social movement. Challenges to neoliberal policies in favor of more liberatory ones must include a “conscious collective attempt to name the world differently.” (Apple, 1996, p.21). I consider two aspects: 1) ways in which neoliberal policies call up and resonate with embedded ideologies. Here I focus on the culture of poverty as a racist ideological underpinning of policies for mixed-income schools and housing. 2) The “good sense” (following Gramsci) of neoliberal policies, specifically charter schools, and ways in which they connect with lived experiences and social movements.

### **Mixed-income Schools, the culture of poverty, and displacement**

Ren2010 promises mixed-income schools in revitalized mixed-income communities. I do not have space here to discuss the documented problems of the PFT,  
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i.e., displacement, the low percentage of tenants returning to mixed-income developments, the lack of 1-1 replacement, exclusionary screening policies and rules, and failure of CHA to adequately track residents (see for example, Bennett, Smith & Wright, 2006; Venkatesh, et al, 2004). It is also questionable that mixed-income HOPE VI developments benefit most low-income displaced families and that that income mixing is a solution for students (Lipman, 2008). However, plans to link mixed-income housing and schools make it clear that guaranteeing middle-class families slots in mixed-income schools is the priority, and marketing schools to these “consumers” is taken for granted in the literature (Raffel et al., 2003; Varady & Raffel, 1995). In Chicago, the opportunity to move to better performing new mixed-income schools conceals the reality of displacement and exclusion. Most displaced public housing students have been relocated to schools academically and demographically similar to those they left, with 84% attending schools with below the average district test scores and 44% in schools on probation (Catalyst Chicago, 2007). Concerns about mixed income schools as a tool of permanent displacement are a central theme in my fieldnotes from community meetings, public hearings, press conferences, and rallies opposing Ren2010 across the city (see also, Nyden, Edlynn & Davis, 2006). Research on HOPE VI developments elsewhere suggests these fears may be well-founded as many original residents’ children are not attending the new schools because of displacement (Raffel et al., 2003; Varady, Raffel, Sweeney, Denson, 2005).

The central premise of mixed-income communities, particularly through HOPE VI, which is the policy guiding Chicago’s Plan for Transformation, is that high concentrations

of very low-income public housing residents produce social pathologies (violence, drug abuse, gangs, unemployment, low-academic achievement) which are at the root of poverty (Popkin, 2006). De-concentrating poverty therefore will lead to improvements in behavior, workforce participation, and ultimately lead to self-sufficiency and a higher standard of living for public housing residents (Popkin, et al, 2004). On the assumption that middle class homeowners will provide the role models and social capital low-income people need to work themselves out of poverty (Brophy & Smith, 1997; Popkin, et al, 2004), HOPE VI aims to transform residents as much as transform housing (Zhang & Weisman, 2006). The political clout of middle class residents is also expected to bring better services, including schools, to the area (Popkin et al, 2004).

This behavioral approach to reducing poverty braids recycled culture of poverty theories (Brophy & Smith, 1997) with a new set of racialized neoliberal and New Urbanist claims on the city. Michael Katz (1989) outlines a long history of moralizing poverty in the U.S. in which notions of the “undeserving poor” “represent the enduring attempt to classify poor people by merit” (p.9). The concentration-of-poverty-breeds-pathology argument recalls this tradition in its most racialized form, echoing Oscar Lewis’s (1966) influential thesis on the intergenerational transmission of the “culture of poverty” among Puerto Ricans and Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s (1965) claim that the “dysfunctional” Black family was at the root of a “tangle of pathologies” that locked African Americans into poverty.

Although temporarily discredited in public policy discourse in the 1970s (though very much present in cultural deficit theories in education), the “culture of poverty” was revived with sociologist William Julius Wilson’s (1987) influential theory of the underclass.<sup>iii</sup> Bruce Katz, of the Brookings Institute, and others (see Massey and Denton, **UIC Great Cities Institute**

1993) picked up the concentration of poverty argument to support HOPE VI while, importantly, neglecting Wilson's argument for economic redistribution. Katz cites public housing as "the most egregious example of how spatial concentration of poverty leads to welfare dependency, sexual promiscuity, and crime" (Bruce Katz, Brookings Institute). This narrative is pervasive in HOPE VI literature.

The assumptions that underpin HOPE VI provide the rationale for deconcentrating low-income students and sending them to mixed-income schools. Richard Kahlenberg (2001), liberal Century Foundation Fellow and key proponent of mixed income schools, asserts: "Every child in the United States—whether rich or poor, white or black, Latino or Asian—should have access to the good education that is best guaranteed by the presence of a majority middle-class student." Kahlenberg argues for the positive influence of middle class students, who, he claims, have greater motivation, superior language skills, more positive attitudes about school and better behavior than their low-income peers. This "common sense" is echoed in literature on the importance of schools in mixed-income housing developments: "Lower-income children benefit from having middle-income children in the classroom" (Raffel, Denson, Varady & Sweeney, 2003, p.75). Kahlenberg also argues that middle-class parents promote effective schools for their children, and these advantages will spill over to lower-income students whose parents are, he claims, less involved and effective advocates for their children.

The concentration of poverty thesis is a racially coded morality discourse disguised in the language of class. It simultaneously targets for correction African American "inner city" communities and the public institutions (housing and schools) with

which they are identified. In 2005, the CEO of CPS described one of these schools proposed to close under Ren2010 as having “a culture of failure.” The African American communities where schools are being closed are all valuable pieces of land. Their gentrification is facilitated by their construction in the White cultural imagination as spaces of danger and lawlessness. Perhaps this explains why closing schools and dispersing students across dangerous city boundaries, even to four schools in three years, is a legitimated policy in low-income African American communities but unthinkable in Chicago’s white middle and upper- middle class areas.

Although framed in the language of class, the subtext is race. The low-income students who are the target of this reform are, in fact, primarily students of color, and their supposed behavioral and attitudinal characteristics resonate with current iterations of racial cultural deficit theories. Race is at once present by implication (resonant in cultural deficit discourse), yet absent in the discourse of mixed-income in which culture is a signifier for race (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

Poverty as social pathology is linked to the supposedly restorative and disciplining effects of the market to encourage individual responsibility and initiative, self-discipline, and regeneration of decaying public institutions. According to this neoliberal logic, while public housing and public schools breed dysfunction and failure, private management, the market, and public-private partnerships foster excellence through entrepreneurship, competition, and choice. Neoliberal doctrine is braided to white supremacist discourses -- “public” and “private” have become racialized metaphors, with the private associated with what is “good” and “white” and the public associated with what is “bad” and “black” (Haymes, 1995, p.20). The logics of capital

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and race intertwine as ideological grounds to eliminate public housing and close schools in Black communities.

Black public spaces are constructed as pathological and in need of regulation and discipline, and mixed-income schools/housing perform this function. This is operationalized under the 1998 Quality Housing and Work Reform Act, which institutionalizes the policing of low-income tenants in new HOPE VI mixed-income developments through rigorous screening and strict behavior rules (Wilén & Nayak, 2006). This is similar to racially coded mixed-income schools with a majority of middle-class students who are assumed to provide the work ethic and behavior standards necessary to transform and discipline low-income students of color. These policies discursively shift public policy from economic redistribution to behavior modification, obligating the state to do nothing about root causes of poverty, racism, substandard and scarce affordable housing, and failing schools. They mask the network of public policy and investment decisions that produced deindustrialization, disinvestment, unemployment, and degradation of public health, the built environment, and education in urban neighborhoods and schools over the past 30 years and laid the groundwork for a new round of investment.

At the same time, the democratic discourse of mixed income communities/schools serves to legitimate disinvestment in schools and communities of color. This is the case in Chicago where there is a long history of failure to adequately invest in and support schools in communities of color. Once devalued, the schools are named failures, closed, and reopened for a largely new clientele. Teachers and

administrators we interviewed in African American schools in the Midsouth recounted being “set up for failure” through a history of shrinking resources, lack of support for teachers, and cuts in support staff while simultaneously held to ever-rising benchmarks of Chicago’s accountability system and No Child Left Behind (Lipman, Person, & KOCO, 2007).

Rachel Weber (2002) notes that the neoliberal state grapples with two contradictory imperatives: creating conditions for capital accumulation and managing potential political resistance. Mixed-income policies seem to address this contradiction. They facilitate the expropriation of public goods (public schools and housing) and further gentrification and the real estate market, while the democratic and inclusive discourse of mixed-income communities and schools, coupled with discourses of racial pathology, legitimate this expropriation.

### **Cultural politics of charter schools and choice**

Charter schools are a neoliberal intervention that opens public education to the market through private management of public schools and a system of consumer choice. School authority is invested in appointed boards that may contract with for-profit educational management organizations (EMOs) that are paid a fee to run the schools (Ford, 2005). Charter schools are another arena of capital accumulation facilitated by the cycle of disinvestment, devaluation, and reinvestment in urban areas and public institutions (Brenner & Theodore, 2002).

That said, we need to ask why do charter schools have support beyond corporate board rooms? In fact, why do some attract progressive teachers, recruit



students of color, and develop liberatory educational models? What do we make of the complex politics of charter schools?

A Vignette: The New Schools Expo, Feb/9/08 held at Williams Multiplex (a precursor to Ren2010 schools), sponsored by: CPS, Parents for School Choice, and the Illinois Network of Charter Schools.

*The expo to market charter schools to prospective students and their parents was, according to the Chicago Defender, attended by over 700 parents and students, mostly African American. The school parking lot was jammed with school buses which provided free transportation from the South and West sides (African American communities). The packet of registration materials contained 2 glossy brochures on Ren2010, leaving no doubt that Ren2010 was central to the promotion of charter schools and that Ren2010 was the sole face of CPS at this event. Tracy Hayes, Communications Director of the Commercial Club's Renaissance Schools Fund told the Chicago Defender: "we are very pleased with this event and plan to make it an annual affair." (cite). Bankrolled by the Illinois Association of Charter Schools, the expo was organized by Parents for School Choice. Their public face at this event was dozens of African American women in red tee shirts with the slogan: My Choice: Great Schools. Our children's education is in OUR hands. Parents for School Choice.*

*At a workshop titled: "Your child, your choice – new schools from a parent's perspective," led by Parents for School Choice, a panel of parents and students talked about their negative experiences in public schools and the virtues*

*of choice and charter schools. During the question and answer session, a parent in the audience from Miles Davis elementary school, addressed the panellists and audience. (Parents at Miles Davis had fought since 1992 for a new building to replace their dilapidated facility. Now that the new building is almost completed, CPS plans, under the latest round of Ren2010 school closings, to turn it into a selective enrollment magnet school, for which future students in the neighbourhood would have to compete to attend.) She appealed for support in the community's struggle to keep Miles Davis a neighbourhood school. "I want the choice to send my kids to the new Miles Davis. The Board [of education] is taking that away with Ren2010 and turning Miles Davis into a magnet school. We have a right to the school. That's our choice." She went on, "Since you all are for choice, I hope you will support us."*

This vignette captures some of the complexity of the cultural politics of choice and charter schools. Gramsci (1971) argued that the construction of hegemony entails ruling groups winning other social strata to their agenda to form a dominant social bloc and gaining leadership over it. Ideologically, this is accomplished by reshaping common sense and by building on people's lived experiences and needs. This theory is helpful in considering how neoliberalism becomes a hegemonic economic, social, and ideological force in the city – how it is materialized on the ground and how it might be contested. Considered in this way, neoliberalization is a process that works its way into the discourses and practices of the city through the actions of local actors, not just elites, but also marginalized and oppressed people. A fundamental condition is that working class people, people of color, and others who are marginalized, oppressed, and

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exploited act in conditions not of our own making and within the terrain available to us. In a time of a strong, progressive social movement, oppressed people ally to vie for power, to push for a liberatory agenda. Absent a strong social movement, in periods when the agenda of dominant classes and social groups is hegemonic, options for action are more limited. People may make tactical decisions to “work the system” and find cracks within an overall retrograde system to address immediate needs. This is particularly the case when the dominant agenda speaks to legitimate grievances and immediate needs. I think charter schools are an example.

The origins and meanings of charter schools are contradictory, located in neoliberal ideology and the logic of capital but also in aspirations for political and cultural self-determination and frustration with the failure of public schools to educate and be responsive to communities of color in particular. Because Charter schools have greater autonomy than regular public schools they also appeal to teachers’ aspirations for professional independence, flexibility, and critical practice in the face of the coercive and reductionist policies of NCLB and CPS. In these cases, teachers and communities see charters as spaces for agency in an otherwise highly centralized and regimented educational regime.

Most Charters in Chicago are corporate, but a few are led by community organizations or groups of teachers and parents seeking an alternative to the dominant practices of public schools. As the chart below indicates, these boundaries can be blurred.

[56 charter schools in Chicago](#)

- 42 corporate → 2+ social justice thrust
- 3 teacher initiated → 2 with corporate boards
- 9 community centered/social justice
- 3 university → tied to corporate/financial interests and development

Some educators and communities of color are taking advantage of the greater flexibility offered by charter schools to develop culturally relevant, community-centered education, in the tradition of Black Independent Schools. The need for flexibility and professional authority in the face of CPS accountability policies is the impetus behind several charters and the reason some socially conscious teachers teach in them. Even though a couple of these schools have corporate boards, they have a relatively progressive philosophy which allows teachers to develop social justice-oriented curriculum. Thus, paradoxically, charter schools are a neoliberal initiative that also opens a crack for liberatory educational initiatives. The ability of these initiatives to sustain themselves and compete in the charter school market may be another story (see Wells, Scott, Lopez, & Holme, 2005).

Chicago's charter schools are concentrated on the African American West and South sides where public schools have been historically under-resourced and which bear scars of decades of racism and public and private disinvestment. The support for alternatives to regular public schools is partly a response to the persistent failure of public schools to provide equitable education in communities of color. This theme is reflected on the web site of Parents for School Choice. It notes, front and center, that "Only 45% of Chicago Public School students graduate from high school, and only 3 of every 100 African-American and Latino males in Chicago Public Schools earn a college

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degree” (<http://www.parentsforchoice.org/>). Concerns with safety in public schools, lack of academic and social support for the academic success of young black men, lack of individual attention, and unresponsive administrators run through the group’s materials.

Ideologically the charter school movement resonates with struggles for self-determination in communities of color: the 1960s community control struggles in New York, Chicago, and elsewhere and the long tradition of Black Independent Schools. This is clear in the framework of the Betty Shabazz Charter schools which come out of the Black Independent School tradition, are rooted in African values and collective commitment, and explicitly challenge the deficit theories that undermine the education and futures of Black children, proclaiming: “Our children bring everything they need to school.” This theme echoes in the slogan on the tee shirts worn by Parents for School Choice: *My Choice: Great Schools. Our children’s education is in OUR hands*. In a context in which parents see few viable alternatives in neighbourhood schools, and in the absence of a strong social movement to transform public education, the charter school movement provides a space for individual agency. Ideologically, it reframes self-determination as individual choice and responsibility. In the face of a failed public system where the neighborhood school is no longer a viable educational option, a parent must be an informed education consumer and find a way to transport her/his child to a school out of the neighbourhood if necessary. One mother on a panel at the Expo said, “My old school was convenient, but sometimes you have to say forget about

convenience. You have to take the bus. As parents we can't blame other people, we have to take charge ourselves."

Roger Dale (1989/1990) describes the process of introducing choice in one part of the British education system to "facilitate a shift from collectivism to individualism, from a view that a common school is desirable to one that encourages parents/consumers to shop around and maximize their children's opportunities of enjoying an "uncommon" education" (pp. 12-13). Progress is equated with neoliberal market solutions that offer equity through market choices and quality through competition. This discourse reshapes the discussion of public education and defines the range of possible actions.

## **Conclusion**

The plan to close 20 of the 22 schools in the Midsouth in 2004 was defeated by a coalition of community organizations, local school councils, unions, and progressive teachers with African American community organizations and parents in the lead. Every round of Ren2010 school closings and conversions to magnet schools and charters has been met with resistance: pickets at the Board of Education, door-to-door organizing, demonstrations at schools, student walk-outs, press conferences, and school and community meetings and Black, Latino, and white alliances. There is much discussion about an elected school board and a percolating discussion about building a movement like that that elected Harold Washington mayor in the 1980s to take back the city. This conversation reflects the recognition that education is linked with an urban agenda that is producing increasing economic, social and spatial inequality and exclusion along lines of race, ethnicity, and class. This represents an emergent ideological current with roots

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in the historical struggles for equitable housing, schools, and community economic development in Chicago. It is one ideological current at play in the contention over education policy.

Neoliberalism disarticulates community control of education from its liberatory history and rearticulates it to choice in the market. But some teachers and communities have seized charter schools and choice as an opportunity to work the system or to claim a space within it. Regardless of whom their funders are, the concerns articulated by Parents for School Choice are grounded in the historical and present reality of the failure of too many public schools to educate children of color and the lack of control families and communities have over their children's education. The underlying concerns are aligned with those of parents fighting school closings who argue that public schools should serve the community, that the community should have a voice, and who propose fundamental changes and improvements in their schools. Further, some charter schools may provide models for what liberatory education in public schools should look like. Challenging the neoliberal agenda requires attention to the common sense that has been constructed around it and to the deeply felt concerns of families and communities and teachers to which it speaks.

At the same time, neoliberal plans to displace African American families and students and create schools that appeal to the middle class are legitimated by a racialized discourse of pathology. The construction of "easily discardable people and social life" (Wilson, Wouters, & Grammenos, 2004) is central to generating broad public consensus around the logic of dismantling public housing and closing schools and

dispersing residents. Every school that is closed for “failure” reproduces the “truth” of dysfunctional communities of color. This “truth” legitimates turning over schools in Black communities to corporate “turn around” operators, disbanding Local School Councils, running schools through charter school companies, and top-down decisions by CPS officials about what kind of school a community should have.

The disenfranchisement, the striving for some measure of community control over schools and the work that goes on in schools, the goals of making schools serve the development of their communities – these are threads running through the contradictory politics of neoliberal education reforms in Chicago. Neoliberalism is a process, not a thing. It is fraught with contradictions and contention that play out in local contexts. These contradictions can be particularly instructive for those of us committed to working for more just schools and a more just social order. If educators and communities are to challenge the neoliberal urban agenda, they will need to draw on, not only the outrage at closing schools and closing down democratic participation, but also the ways in which these policies resonate with people’s experiences and struggles.



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<sup>i</sup> Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is a development tool. The city declares an area "blighted" and unlikely to be developed without the diversion of tax revenues. Once declared a TIF, property tax revenues for schools, libraries, parks and other public works are frozen for 23 years, and all growth in revenues above this level are put in a TIF fund to support development. TIF funds subsidize developers directly and pay for development infrastructure costs. As of fall 2007, Chicago had created 153 TIFs, many in the downtown and areas already undergoing real estate development (Smith, J., 2006, p.291). For extensive coverage of Chicago TIFs see *The Reader TIF Archive* <http://www.chicagoreader.com/tifarchive/>

<sup>ii</sup> The gentrification indicators were developed by the Natalie P. Vorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement, College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs, University of Illinois-Chicago. The maps were a collaboration of the Vorhees Center and Nathan Haines (Lipman & Haines, 2007).

<sup>iii</sup> Wilson argued that structural changes in the economy and the exodus of middle class African Americans from inner city communities bred an underclass culture which is a principal barrier to African American labor force participation.