

EDUCATION POLICIES OF PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA'S ADMINISTRATION  
IN A NEOLIBERAL ERA

by

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## ABSTRACT

### Purpose of the study:

As Barack Obama assumes position as President of the United States it is important to examine closely his educational agenda, assessing how the emerging policies implemented by his administration will impact the lives of young people and the future of public schools. In addition, the current political environment is overwhelming consumed with addressing the struggling and failing economic systems in the U.S. and abroad, and it is thus imperative to assess the educational system by examining the influence of political and economic interests and ideologies on school reform efforts. The body of work by critical theorists and educators (e.g. Apple, 2006; Gabbard, Ed. 2007; Hill 2007 & 2008; Lipman, 2007; Ross & Gibson, Ed. 2007; Spring, 2008) provides a useful theoretical lens for analyzing the influence of capitalist and neoliberal ideologies on the education system and policies.

Furthermore, those concerned with the current state of inequities in educational opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for students, especially those disenfranchised and marginalized populations, may find value in examining President Obama's educational policies by examining the impact of neoliberal and market-driven ideologies in public schools and national school reform efforts.

### Procedure:

My research began with a study of global socio-political-economic systems, followed by several research projects and literature reviews examining the disparities in educational access, experiences, and outcomes of youth of color, foster youth, queer youth, and economically disenfranchised youth and their families. I then conducted a literature review of critical theorists perspective of the influence of neoliberalism on the education system. I finally utilized this theoretical framework to analyze Obama's education agenda and policies in his first two months in office.

### Findings:

Critical theorists assert that neoliberal ideologies and practices affect schools in three key ways: 1) to inculcate educators and students alike with an acceptance of capitalism; 2) to structure school pedagogy and practices so that future workers

are trained to perform in the capitalist economy; and 3) to support free market expansion in schools through private/public partnerships.

Obama and his cabinet's economic ideologies do not appear to challenge neoliberal agendas set forth by his predecessors. Likewise, plans initiated by President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan concerning educational policies and system reform make some adjustments to existing legislation under *No Child Left Behind*, but does not change, and in fact, enhances the role of private interests and investors in schools, maintaining the legacy of linking the purpose of education to global competitiveness. The strategies initiated within his administration's proposed policies, such as enhancing accountability measures; sustaining the dominance of using standardized tests to assess student learning and teacher and school quality; and expanding charter school development, are sustaining and maintaining the legacy of school reform efforts that critical theorists tie to market-driven interests. Furthermore, these reforms are not insignificant and, as some critical researchers contend, are the root causes of the inequities within the education system rather than the cure.

#### Conclusions:

As we approach the end of the first decade in the 21st Century, the social, economic, and environmental issues we face are profoundly more complex and challenging than in any prior generation (Brown, 2008; Castells, 1997/2004; Klein N., 2007). Furthermore, since the function of public education within this country has long been tied to its economic goals, schools today remain a central focus of narrow system reforms that aim to make students more competitive in the global marketplace.

However, in spite of the inspiration President Obama invoked, and the hope he continues to enshrine, it is evident that his political ideologies do not stray far from his predecessors. I have examined the historical influence of global neoliberal economic policies on the U.S. education system, finding much resonance with the contemporary policies and agenda Obama has set forth.

It is thus, the responsibility of concerned parents, educators, students, and everyday citizens, to hold President Obama accountable to the policies he is establishing in our education system. We have an opportunity to hold President Obama to his call to action, actively engaging in shaping our democracy and the future education of youth.

## PREFACE

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## **Part I: Introduction and Methodology**

### **Introduction: President Barack Obama's Educational Policies in a Neoliberal Era**

Since Barack Obama took office as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States on January 20, 2009, he has inspired a majority of people in this nation to believe in his dream, that “Yes, we can,” (Obama, 2008) as was evidenced in his landslide victory. As the first African-American to hold the nation's highest office, his election has arguably taken on greater meaning than any other in history. The challenges that await him supersede those of his predecessors: a faltering international economy and a national unemployment rate soaring higher than its been since 1984 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009), a mounting \$10 trillion federal deficit (Treasury Direct, 2009), an unpopular and expensive war in Iraq (*Iraq War*, n.d.), international social and cultural upheaval and failing states (Castells, 1997/2004), and diminishing natural resources leading to global climate change (Brown, 2008). In addition, he ascends during a time of mounting criticism of the impact of what some call “disaster capitalism” (Klein N., 2007) and predictions of Marx and Engles (1848/2005) concerning the faults of capitalism are steadfastly revealing themselves. In the midst of these challenges, Obama has been able to inspire the nation across the political spectrum, repeatedly acknowledged for his ability to appeal to the public around traditional divides. Among the many challenges he will face as this nation's leader are the complex issues within the education system. It is thus important to analyze the educational policies, proposed and implemented by Obama's Administration, in particular, their purpose and function within the United States serving a global, capitalist economy.

Throughout history, the social power and status of students has been intricately linked to the schools they attend (Spring, 2008). This is the result of an inequitable education system in which schools across the country reflect the wealth or disparity of the communities that house them. As a result, students are predisposed to outcomes that are largely dependent upon the opportunities afforded to them by the particular schools they attend (Belfanz & Legters, 2004; Kozol, 2005). Because the resources and offerings available within public schools vary considerably and predictably along socio/cultural and economic backgrounds, throughout history youth from disenfranchised socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds meet numerous barriers to achieving social and political power (Spring, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), grossly limiting their ability to attain economic self-sufficiency (Wald & Martinez, 2003; Smiley & Robinson, 2009), especially within a capitalist economic system.

In spite of nearly three decades of educational reforms that have followed a relatively straight-forward trajectory of preparing students to compete in the global workforce (Schneider & Keesler, 2007; Spring, 2008) numerous studies have found that nearly two thirds of students in the United States are struggling academically, are not prepared for college, and are dropping out of high school (e.g., Barton, 2005; Belfanz & Legers, 2004; Friedlander & Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hoye & Sturgis, 2005). Moreover, a vast majority of these students disproportionately represent socioeconomic groups who have been subjected to a historical legacy of societal inequity, discrimination, and persecution that continues to this day (Campaign for High School Equity, 2007; Spring, 2008).

Several major trends revealing disparities in educational experiences and outcomes of youth of color have been well substantiated by numerous studies and reports showing that nationwide disproportionately and overwhelmingly, youth of color:

- On average score far below their Anglo- and Asian-American counterparts in standardized tests, regardless of their level of income (NCES, 2007; and *Excellencia in Education*, 2006)
- Over 50% are dropping out or are being “pushed out” of high school prior to graduation (Barton, 2005; Belfanz & Legters, 2004; Hoye & Sturgis, 2005)
- On average lack access and opportunities to attend four-year colleges because the schools they attend, over half to one third of the time, do not offer courses and sequences required for entry (Campaign for High School Equity, 2007; Friedlander & Darling-Hammond, 2007)
- When lacking a high school diploma and college degree struggle to attain economic sustainability within a neoliberal economy that favors post-secondary educational attainment (Hanna & Schofield, 2003; and Wald & Martinez, 2003).

The challenges students face in schools within the United States has increasingly become the focus of national attention and debate over the last quarter century (Bracey, 2003; Spring, 2008). With the federal government establishing a more prominent role in education (primarily through the *No Child Left Behind Act*) public and media attention has been directed towards chronic inequities experienced by students from underprivileged socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. As a result, what were formally issues raised primarily by civil rights activists, are now at least discussed, if not addressed, among many groups, including non-profit organizations, foundations, and corporations (e.g. California's EDGE Campaign, 2007; Gates, 2005; New Ways to Work, 2007; Pitman & Toleman, 2002). There is now widespread acknowledgement that race, class, gender, primary language, and ability levels influence and have directly led to inequality in educational opportunities and outcomes (e.g. as noted by Obama, 2009e and also Belfanz & Legters, 2004; Campaign for High School Equity, 2007; Friedlander & Darling-Hammond, 2007; Kozol, 2005). However, there is very little consensus concerning what is necessary to challenge these disparate experiences and develop policies and practices that amount to true educational equality, or even what that would look like and what that means. This is particularly true among those who differ in ideological and philosophical beliefs concerning the purpose of education. Increasingly, however, educational researchers are directing attention to issues, policies, and practices that perpetuate and advance capitalist and neoliberal political and economic agendas within educational policies (Apple, 2006; Hill, 2008; Hursh, 2007; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007; McLaren, 2003a & 2003b).

Critical theorists and educators argue that these inequities are the result of schools situated within unequal relations of power in larger society with hierarchical, oppressive relationships leading to polarized opportunities and outcomes within the education system (Apple, 2006; Freire, 1970; Kozol, 2005; Kumashiro, 2008; Spring, 2008). Although systemic inequities are well-documented and have become part of the mainstream dialogue concerning school reform in this country, critical theorists and educators (e.g. Apple, 2006; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007; McLaren, 2003a & 2003b) question the measures used to account for discrepancies (namely, differences in test results) and the prescribed solutions (for example, increased standardization and privatization). Central to their critique is an awareness that the knowledge students are

expected to acquire (standards and curriculum), the methods used to disperse and transmit that information (pedagogy), the manner permitted to students to demonstrate their understanding (praxis), and the method of assessment undertaken to determine competency are deeply rooted in ideologies and beliefs and are not, in fact, neutral (Apple, 2006; Goodlad, 1984/2004; Kumashiro, 2008; McLaren, 2003b; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

By positioning schools in the role of pursuing what Spring (2008) calls “ideological management,” throughout history schools have played a central role in “distributing a particular knowledge to society” (p. 5). That “knowledge” is defined and determined by those with power and influence and sustained by the acceptance (or at least absence of conflict) by public citizens (Bourdieu, 1998; Hursh, 2007). Thus, it is the responsibility of educators, families, and those who care about young people to examine the ideologies underpinning school reform, and hold our leaders accountable to the real outcomes of their policies and practices (Smiley & Robinson, 2009). Furthermore, as is argued in this paper, the power invested in schools is intricately linked to neoliberal ideologies that have national and global significance; it is therefore in the best interest of all citizens to be concerned with deconstructing political and economic influences enforced upon the education system.

Critical theorists, scholars and researchers draw attention to the fact that education is situated within a social and political environment in which it has become increasingly apparent that the interrelationships among ecological changes, economic collapse, and social justice issues must be addressed (e.g., Brown, 2008; Castells, 1997/2004; Klein N., 2007; McMuntry, 1998; and Waring, 1999). The ideological beliefs and political policies surrounding these major issues frame the content of educational discourse, the attitudes of educators, and abilities of students to address the impact and consequences of decisions made by their political leaders (Davis, Sumara, Luce-Kapler, 2007).

As we move into the next generation of educational policy under the leadership of Barack Obama, all eyes are watching to see what changes will come about in the nation's schools, and what students will experience as a result. Further, as I will explore in this paper, Obama and his cabinet's economic ideologies do not appear to challenge neoliberal agendas set forth by his predecessors. Likewise, Obama's ideas concerning educational policies make some adjustments to existing law, but does not change, and in fact, enhances the role of private interests and investors in schools, maintaining the legacy of linking the purpose of education to global competitiveness (Obama, 2009c, 2009d, 2009e). As will be discussed, these positions are not insignificant and, as some critical researchers contend, are the root causes of the inequities within the education system (e.g. Apple, 2006; Freire, 1970; Kumashiro, 2008; Spring, 2008).

Obama's educational policies reflect the political position he prides himself to hold, which he declares are non-ideological, but rather based on “what works” (Obama, 2009e). However, as will be argued, education can never be neutral; it is steeped in ideologies that most often maintain the status quo of those with political and economic power and privileges (Apple, 2006; McLaren, 2003b). Furthermore, throughout the nation's history, schools have been designed to serve its economic functions (Spring, 2008), which has also been Obama's position. The purpose of education to “prepare them to compete in a global economy” (Obama & Biden, n.d.) is not new, but rather reflects the push of capitalism and private interests that have dominated

education for the last century (Spring, 2008). As this country's economic agenda is functioning under the new generation of global capitalism - neoliberal ideologies - it is clear that the education system, like all previous eras, is conforming to those goals.

What follows is a critical analysis of several of the key aspects of President Obama's education agenda, utilizing a lens shaped by the research and analysis of the impact of capitalism and neoliberalism on the education system as established by the body of work of critical educators and researchers (e.g. see Apple, 2006; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2003; Gabbard, Ed., 2008; Kumashiro, 2008; and Ross & Gibson, Ed., 2007). To date, Obama has been in office just under 100 days, and as such, my analysis is primarily focused on the plans and proposals of his administration, as new policies have yet to be fully implemented, if at all. Further, although research and commentary by scholars concerning the influence and evidence of neoliberalism within the education system abounds, there has been very little analysis with this perspective concerning Obama's policies (but see Kumashiro, 2009), and I therefore offer an analysis using/drawing from these perspectives.

Following my review of the evidence concerning the disparities in educational experiences, options, and outcomes of students and subsequent analysis of critical educators and researchers, I use these perspectives to analyze several key areas of Obama's educational agenda. Because of the limitations of scope for this paper, I have chosen to focus primarily on policies intended to address the "achievement gap," including proposed modifications to accountability measures and assessments legislated under *No Child Left Behind*, and proposals to expand charter schools. Further research is recommended to fully examine the implementation of Obama's educational policies, especially implications within a neoliberal economic environment.

### **Methodology**

The foundation of my research project grew out of the topics addressed and explored during the first year in my graduate program. The first semester course in the Action for a Viable Future program, entitled "Critical Inquiry: Preparation for Action and Change" explored major global issues, in particular, those influenced by the capitalist economy such as social justice, ecological changes, and global political systems. Through this course, I began to understand issues concerning the global economy and neoliberalism in new ways and was introduced to a number of researchers and scholars (e.g. Bourdieu, 1998; Brown, 2008; Castells 1997/2004; Foucault, 1990; Marx & Engels, 2005) which I have used extensively in developing the theoretical framework for my analysis of Obama's education policies.

There are many active definitions of neoliberalism, although most distinguish neoliberalism from classical or *laissez-faire* liberalism in the evolving relationship of the the involvement of government and nation states in the promotion and support of corporate interests (Hill, 2007 & 2008; Klein, N., 2007). David Harvey's (2006) theoretical work has influenced many critical theorists, and defines neoliberalism as the "centralization and consolidation of class power" (as cited by Goodman & Gonzalez, 2009, ¶ 36). Lipman and Haines (2007) provide a simple definition; "By neoliberalism, we mean a set of policies that promote the primacy of the market, the fluidity of capital and labor, and individual self-interest in all spheres of economic and social life" (p. 476).

Throughout the first semester, I struggled with locating the impact of these global political and economic issues within the education system. I began to research the disparities in educational attainment and achievement of youth of color as a starting point. Some of the findings from that research are included in this paper, primarily the work of researchers who exposed inequities in high school experiences and scholars who critique contemporary education policies (e.g. Barton, 2005; Belfanz & Legters, 2004; Campaign for High School Equity, 2007; Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Fredlaender & Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hoye & Sturgis, 2005; Pittman & Toleman, 2002; Wald & Martinez, 2003). However, at the time of this preliminary research, I was not aware of the body of work and particular critique offered by critical theorists and as such, many of these scholars do not approach their work with a lens that is necessarily critical of the impact of neoliberalism on education. Nonetheless, these researchers offered a foundation for understanding the disparate outcomes in educational experiences within the contemporary education system in the United States, and as such has been a valuable source for this research.

During subsequent semesters, three of my classes introduced me to the work of critical educators (e.g. Apple, 1996; Bracey, 2003; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, Ed. 2003; Goodlad, 1984/2004; Kumashiro, 2008; Spring, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995) and offered a doorway to the critique I was yearning for. Critical theorists and educators I came to understand are not only committed to “the ideal and practice of social justice within schools, but to the transformation of those structures and conditions within society that functioned to thwart the democratic participation of all people” (Darder, Baltodano, Torres, 2003, p. 2). Furthermore, as described by McLaren (2003) critical theorists and scholars “view school knowledge as historically and socially rooted and interest bound,” which is most often dictated by those with political and economic power and reinforces hegemonic power structures (p. 72). McLaren goes on to say,

Critical pedagogy asks how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does and by who and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others are clearly not...The crucial factor here is that some forms of knowledge have more power and legitimacy than others (p. 72).

Critical theorists point out that historically, governing ideologies and knowledge have been dictated by ruling classes, primarily White, male, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, land-owners (Spring, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Zinn, 1995). Over time, those with influence and power have expanded to include some people of color and women, however, economic priorities and conservative ideologies continue to dominate political decisions, circumventing the values and needs of low-income people. Furthermore, those who have broken through the “glass ceiling” often do so only by appropriating the ideologies of dominant classes, which is increasingly based on economic interests (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Friere, 1970).

The theoretical framework of critical theorists may be briefly summarized as an analysis of “...newly emerging forms of capitalism along with the changing forms of domination that accompanie[s] them” (Giroux, 2003, p.27). Giroux (2003) explains, “critical theory refers to both a ‘school of thought’ and a process of critique...[It] exemplifies a body of work that both demonstrates and simultaneously calls for the necessity of ongoing critique, one in which the

claims of any theory must be confronted with the distinction between the world it examines and portrays, and the world as it actually exists” (p. 27-28).

After exposure to this theoretical framework that I identified with, I grew concerned that many of my colleagues (often educators and administrators) seemed to lack interest in or awareness of the influence of global political issues such as the effects of capitalism and institutionalized forms of discrimination on the educational system. I heard many of them discuss the challenges they experienced in the classroom, their awareness of inequities, their concerns with *No Child Left Behind*; however, examining the faults within education system as situated within the global economic policies was an uncomfortable topic often averted. This was particularly apparent as the 2008 election was approaching and what seemed to me as an almost entirely uncritical lens and adoration for Obama was the status quo.

It, thus, became important to me to better understand on one hand, what was the body of work that critical theorists had developed, in particular, those works that examined the impact of neoliberalism on education. I shared this interest with members of my graduate committee who offered suggestions for readings and authors, and I posted a similar request on the EdLiberation listserv. From these leads, I compiled a list of 31 books and articles, several of which I used extensively in this research. I also conducted an online search in the Sonoma State article database for titles with “neoliberalism education” and reviewed articles that were published within 2008 and that addressed U.S. education. I found over the course of my research that the most valuable perspectives were those offered in the anthologies on these topics (e.g. Gabbard, 2008; Ross & Gibson, Ed. 2007) and a few key researchers (Apple, 2006; Lipman 2007; Kumashiro, 2008), which provided a basis for the theoretical framework.

After reviewing the body of work and as I wrote the theoretical framework for this paper, Obama was transitioning into office as President. I reviewed both of his autobiographies (Obama, 1995/2004 & 2006) and closely followed and analyzed his public speeches. Once Obama came into office, I examined the new policies and proposals he set forth concerning education and schools, analyzing them with the theoretical framework of critical theorists. Following the selection of Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education, I searched for additional sources that addressed the Chicago Public Schools school reform efforts that took place under the leadership of Duncan in his role as Superintendent. I received a number of suggestions from the EdLiberation listserv. In addition, I set up two “Google Alerts” – one to search for “Arne Duncan” the second to search for “Obama Education Policy,” which I periodically reviewed.

Because of the “real time” researching and writing required during the course of this research project, I was not able to carefully review every comment Obama or Duncan made on the topic of education, nor analyze completely the implications of Obama's recent policies. However, because both Obama and Duncan have made very clear their position on particular issues (e.g. proposed changes to *No Child Left Behind* and plans to expand charter schools) I was able to narrow in and focus on the body of work of critical theorists and scholars that address these issues. Thus, this study limits its scope to issues concerning policies and practices Obama intends to, or has already, implemented, including those related to closing the “achievement gap,” aligning schools to career-focused themes and interests, and charter schools.

## **Part II: Critical Theorist Analysis of Neoliberal Influences on the Education System**

### **Schools as Centers of Societal Change and Reforms**

Throughout the history of public education in the United States, the ideas, interests, and needs of parents, educators, and politicians have shaped schools (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Goodlad, 1984/2004). Over time, social and civil rights victories have dramatically affected the rights of students and opened up access to education to those historically prohibited – in particular females, people of color, and those with disabilities (Spring, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Despite these radical shifts in student populations and demographics, the education system continues to focus its goals narrowly on traditionally conservative approaches to teaching and learning (e.g. standardization, assessment based on testing, basic academic curriculum) and outcomes tied to college and career preparation (Apple, 2006; Goodlad, 1984/2004; Labaree, 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). These purposes have dominated other values such as social-emotional development and civic engagement, and pedagogical content that includes multicultural perspectives and praxis such as inquiry- and project-based learning (Community Matters, 2009; Goodlad, 1984/2004; Gutek, 2004; Labaree, 2000; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In addition, schools have been at the center of political efforts to shape and form the ideologies, beliefs, and livelihoods of its citizens, serving to either confer or confirm social and economic status (Spring, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). However, instead of being the idealized vision of a multicultural utopia, schools tend to be stewards of assimilation, emphasizing conformity and respect of authority, frequently utilizing hegemonic forms of curriculum (Goodlad, 1984/2004; Labaree, 2000; Spring, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

However, it is well substantiated that the experiences and outcomes of a vast majority of disenfranchised students overwhelmingly do not match their more privileged and affluent peers, despite efforts by national education policies and reforms proposed to support them (e.g. Barton, 2005; Campaign for High School Equity, 2007; Friedlander & Darling-Hammond, 2007; Kozol, 2005; Wald & Martinez, 2003). In spite of evidence demonstrating that specific policies and practices are not resulting in intended outcomes (for example see Brown & Gustain, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2007; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vaquez Heilig, 2008) very little has changed in political discourse and subsequent policies concerning education in the United States. Critical theorists argue that this is because education is situated within political and economic structures and ideologies with intentional and unintentional outcomes that may or may not be stated or apparent (e.g. Apple, 2006; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Kumashiro, 2008).

Schools in the United States today are facing issues not dissimilar from those in the past, despite contemporary rhetoric espousing the crises in education (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 2003). In fact, critical scholars argue that many of the challenges schools face today are the result of increasing access to education for students previously excluded in prior generations, but not adequately addressing the social and economic costs of endemic poverty and failing infrastructures of social services (Kumashiro, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Spring, 2008).

We are living during an era in which graduating high school and going on to higher education is nearly a prerequisite to living independently with economic sufficiency throughout the course of one's life (Obama, 2009d; Seltzer, 2007; Wald & Martinez, 2003). This is the result of the

current economic system favoring those with post-secondary degrees in order to earn a living wage. However, this is in spite of the fact that a vast majority of available jobs are within the service sector and require limited skills, creating an over-educated workforce forced to take low-salaried jobs (Hill, 2008). Ohanian (2008) argues that corporate elites have “deliberately sought a world class education in order to lower the wages of high tech workers – with the result being a lot of highly qualified people competing for the same job – and desperate enough to take whatever is offered” (p. 155). This is not readily evident, however, given the incessant propaganda spanning the last 25 years, declaring the need for education that prepares students for a competitive global workforce. For example in one speech entitled “Complete and Competitive America,” Obama (2009e) frames his proposal for educational reforms as intricately linked to economic goals (stating “economy” eight times in his remarks). This echoes the focus of educational policies of his predecessors, most notably, the agenda set forth in the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk* focused on a “world of ever-accelerating competition and change in the conditions of the workplace” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, ¶ 26). There is clearly an incongruity between the focus on accelerating preparations for workforce competition in the midst of the failing economic system resulting in excessive and growing job loss. Critical theorists argue this reality is frequently overlooked because the capitalistic, neoliberal economy is so pervasive and embedded in our consciousness as the *only option*, that to question it is seen as unpatriotic or even, heretical (Bourdieu, 1998; Giroux, 2004; Hill, 2008; McLaren, 2004).

Adding complexity to this matter is that students who are denied access to participating in this global competition for self-sufficiency overwhelming represent particular socio-cultural-ethnic groups, including those from low-income backgrounds and/or who grow up as wards of the court in foster care or juvenile justice (Campaign for High School Equity, 2007; Wald & Martinez, 2003). It seems to me that this reality encourages (and often forces) social justice advocates and educators (who may also be critical of the capitalistic system) to focus their attention on helping disadvantaged students “*get in*” and *take advantage of the system themselves* so that they might emancipate out of their social status (e.g. see Education Trust, n.d.; NAACP, 2007).

Furthermore, by skirting attention away from challenging the systemic and institutionalized barriers that affect all young people, hegemonic institutions remain intact and, in fact, strengthen over the course of time and throughout history as the “way things are” and conceived to be commonsense (Kumashiro, 2008). However, as Hill (2007) states “social justice by itself is not enough. There cannot be social justice in a capitalist society, in situations of gross economic inequality...[it] can only be partial” (p. xxx). Therefore, despite the best intentions of educators to support disenfranchised students by transforming schools to make them “better” and more accessible, unless unexamined assumptions and inequalities perpetuated under capitalism are challenged, there will always be winners and losers, no matter their skin color, sex, class, or other characteristic, despite access to opportunities.

### **Schools as Centers of Ideological Management**

Since the 1980s, public education concerns have been of national significance, framed with a message of urgency concerning connections between school “failures” and losing ground on global economic competitiveness (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Spring, 2008). The causes most frequently attributed to school and student

failure has been lack of standards, lack of accountability, lack of “choice” in which schools to attend, poor quality educators, and poor management (Apple, 2006; Berliner and Biddle, 2006; Cohen, 2006; Kumashiro, 2008). The dominant discourse surrounding these issues has sustained the decades (e.g. *A Nation at Risk*, 1983; *No Child Left Behind*, 2002) placing blame of “failed” schools largely on educators and communities without a deeper examination of the political systems and ideologies that undergird the schools themselves (Apple, 2008; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007; Spring, 2008). The saturation of rhetoric espousing fear and failure is palpable throughout contemporary publications as well (e.g. Education Week, 2009a & 2009b or any issue of Ed Week). As several notable researchers claim (Apple, 2006; Giroux, 2004; Klein, N., 2007; Kumashiro, 2008; Spring, 2008) perpetuating a climate of fear is an intentional strategy to frame the educational debate in ways that support particular ideological and political interests.

One example of how unsubstantiated, misinformation, became part of mainstream ideological acceptance is the “landmark” report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983). Frequently cited as a hallmark to expanding public awareness concerning the failings of schools (e.g. Education Week, 2009a; Obama, 2006; Smiley & Robinson, 2009), several researchers have found the claims and the research base of the report to be grossly unsubstantiated and misrepresented. Hallowed for its success for creating a “Sputnik-like” drama, the report successfully set forth what some argue as a “manufactured crises” to advance pro-business and neoliberal agendas (Berliner & Biddle, 2005; Bracey, 2003; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007). Blaming schools as the cause of U.S. economic failure, Bracey’s (2003) reserach demonstrates that the report’s claims were inaccurate, and the data was misrepresented and “spun” to support the advancement of school reforms that would support global competitiveness. In addition, Bracey argues that for years following the report, evidence that challenged its claims was deliberately suppressed. Others (Kumashiro, 2008; Spring, 2008) note that the report helped ensure that education would remain a national issue by “blaming public schools for international economic problems” and exhorting states to increase academic standards, improve teacher quality, reform the curriculum, and to privatize the system bringing a market approach to schools (Spring, p. 471).

What would be the purpose of intentionally misrepresenting the quality of education within the United States? Who would benefit from this misinformation? In looking at the political landscape surrounding educational policies at the time of the release of the report, the Reagan Administration had a great deal invested in rolling back many of the progressive education reforms of the 1970s such as advancing conservative and capitalist ideologies and influences, and one way of doing this was to make the case that schools were failing (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 2003). Furthermore, as his economic agenda focused on extreme forms of unregulated policies to allow for free market capitalism, structuring an education system that supported essentialist pedagogical practices that limited “free thinking” and instead focused on “the basics” made commonsense to conservatives (Bracey, 2003; Kumashiro, 2008).

The prevailing conservative, neoliberal ideologies can be traced back to the work of Milton Friedman and the fundamentalist form of capitalism he developed in his work at the Chicago School (Klein, N., 2007). Friedman’s economic ideologies have influenced numerous Presidents and international leaders (such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher), and eulogized in his death as demonstrated by the declaration of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, to declare January 29, 2007 “Milton Friedman Day” (Klein, N., 2007, p. 22). However, among Friedman’s

economic policies was the conviction that shock and crises were important taking advantage of what he saw as “irrational attachment to a socialist system” in public schools (as cited in Klein, N., p. 13). Therefore the crises of “failing educational system” becomes an important instigator for perusing an economic agenda that serves private interests.

A democratic president did not disrupt the rationale behind school reforms that were introduced in the 80's. In support of globalization, Clinton's educational policies invited corporate influence and privatization, and ramped up standardization and testing requirements, which was consistent with his education policies as governor in Arkansas (Kumashiro, 2008; Spring, 2008).

Furthermore, conservative and corporate think tanks, foundations, and political action committees have played in influencing the dominant discourse concerning the education system (Apple, 2006; Kumashiro, 2008) and continue to do so (e.g. Gates, 2005). For example, in the 1980s and 90s, numerous conservative, “Right-wing” groups formed to expand their influence in the public sector, in particular schools, advocating for pushing public dollars for private schools and taking positions on local Boards of Education to influence decisions in curriculum and local education policies (Apple, 2006; Kumashiro, 2008; Spring, 2008). These are just a few examples of how national leaders and local representatives – across political platforms - have framed school reform issues in ways that blame schools for their challenges and “failures,” using those arguments to legitimize and position essentialist pedagogical ideologies to “fix” the problems and advance closer ties between the needs of business and public schools.

This is not to say that our representative government should not be concerned about the state of education in this country. Clearly, “savage inequalities” do exist between and among different socioeconomic groups of students and the schools they attend (Kozol, 1991 & 2005). However, critical theorists argue that the challenges the education system has faced over time as it has become more rather than less inclusive of students from diverse backgrounds, is not because of the failure of students, educators, or schools themselves, but rather because of the social and economic disparities that exist within society (Apple, 2006; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Kumashiro, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006). As argued by Marx and Engels (1848/2005) maintaining these disparities is an intentional bi-product of capitalism.

Because of the strong relationship between the purpose of schools to support and maintain capitalism, schools function as hegemonic institutions housed within political environments focused on constructing and protecting particular ideologies (Apple, 2006; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Gutek, 2004; Spring, 2008). Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (2003) contribute a useful description of how hegemony influences education:

Hegemony is not a static or absolute state. On the contrary, hegemony must be fought for constantly in order to retain its privileged position as the status quo. As a consequence, each time a radical form threatens the integrity of the status quo, generally this element is appropriated, stripped of its transformative intent, and reified into a palatable form. This process serves to maintain [that] existing power relations [remain] intact (p. 14).

Through a recognition that schools are operating within a *system* that perpetuates inequity, it is clear that policies put forth by those in positions of power serve to perpetuate inequality and benefit those with privilege. (Examples of this will be discussed in Part III.)

For the last century, schools have been governed by particular forms of conservative, essentialist, and neoliberal ideologies that have hindered attempts by progressive, liberatory, and critical educators to transform education and praxis in ways that disrupt inequity and inequalities within classrooms, schools, and society (Gutek, 2004; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Kumashiro, 2008). Examining the philosophical and ideological positioning of contemporary educational policies is challenging because the language used is crafty, reflects genuine concerns and interests among most people, and is often misleading. For example, focusing on eliminating the achievement gap experienced by youth of color is an important goal, one historically unrecognized by a majority of the population. However, when the policies and systems established to address issues further exacerbate the problems, sustaining a constant crises in education, politicians can continue to gain from what appears to be a sensitivity to disenfranchised populations, while students, teachers, and schools take the fall (Kumashiro, 2008).

These illustrations support the argument that the dominant discourse framing educational policy is politically motivated, socially-constructed and -influenced by ideologies developed primarily by the conservative-“Right,” but sustained by neoliberals on the “Left.” Marx and Engels (1848/2005) argue that education is determined by social conditions, which under capitalism, is designed to produce docile workers. Central to critique by researchers and educators influenced by Marxist and other progressive ideologies, is their recognition of the formidable role of neoliberalism and capitalism on education and schools since the 1970s (Giroux, 2004; Gutek, 2004). Giroux (1994) claims that “Central to the hegemony of neoliberal ideology is a particular view of education in which market-driven identities and values are both produced and legitimated” (p. 494). Thus, pedagogy becomes a force for “creating the ideological and affective regimes central to reproducing neoliberalism” (Giroux, 2004, p. 494). Like Marx and Engels, Giroux argues, “neoliberal capitalism performs the dual task of using education to train workers for service sector jobs and to produce life-long consumers” (p. 495). In summary, the influence of neoliberal ideological management and practices within schools serves three primary functions: 1) to inculcate educators and students alike with an acceptance of capitalism; 2) to structure school pedagogy and practices so that future workers are trained to perform in the capitalist economy; and 3) to support free market expansion in schools through private/public partnerships to eventually lead to privatizing public schools.

In addition, critical theorists have examined the influence of conservative ideologies in contemporary education reforms, in particular, how conservatism reinforces neoliberalism (Apple, 2006; Hill, 2007 & 2008; Kumashiro, 2008). Hill (2008) argues that neoconservative policies are important because they “persuade the poor to vote (right-wing Republican) for a social or religious or antiabortion or homophobic or racist agenda against their own (more left-wing, more Democratic, or further left) economic self-interest” (p. xv). Apple (2006) asserts similar claims, arguing that the educational political system is situated within a movement towards “conservative modernization” serving religious (Christian fundamentalists), capitalist (neoliberal), and traditional (neo-conservative) interests. This is particularly evident when efforts for reform run counter to the interests of powerful ideological and economic interests, such as

those governed by religion, capitalism, and race and class supremacy (Apple, 2006; Kumashiro, 2008). For example, historical pedagogical practices that included progressive forms of multicultural education, including bilingual instruction and cross-cultural studies, have been forbidden in favor of educational policies and pedagogy that promotes a single “American” monoculture (Anglo) and the sole use of the English language in classrooms (Spring, 2008).

According to Roger Dale “‘Conservative modernization’ is the attempt to simultaneously ‘free’ individuals for economic purposes but to control them for social purposes” (as cited in Lipman, 2007, p. 38). Because many conservative values are rooted in deeply personal beliefs on one hand, and strong social biases on the other, people often vote for their convictions first, even if it does not serve their political or economic interests (Kumashiro, 2008).

Furthermore, Bourdieu (1998) argues that neoliberalism has been framed by media, politicians, and educators as inevitable and self-evident, as though there is no alternative. Similarly, Kumashiro (2008) contends that “the success of the neoliberal movement can be understood in large part in terms of its ability to go unquestioned, to be taken for granted as the way things should be” (pp. 36-37). Furthermore, “attempts made to improve schooling that defy ‘common sense’ have been dismissed as biased or politically motivated, as a distraction of the real work of schools” (Kumashiro, p.5). It can thus be deduced that the ideological management of people, dispersed by political, corporate, and media leaders, has been successful in indoctrinating the mainstream to accept and perpetuate capitalist economic policies as commonsense, even when its failures are clearly evident, as is the case in contemporary society.

### **Impact of Global Capitalism and Neoliberal Policies on Education**

In order to understand the impact of neoliberalism on education, it is helpful to review the changes in global capitalism over the last forty years. Economists and commentators have traced the shift from the more socially democratic/welfare state in the 1970s to the neoliberal economic policies of today (Apple, 2006; Hill, 2007; Klein N., 2007). These shifts in economic policies parallel educational policies and practices in schools as well (Apple, 2006; Lipman, 2007; Spring, 2008). While the functions of schools in the United States have been tied to economic interests since the formation of common schools in the early nineteenth century, the development of multi-faceted policies, programs, and school management structures to support U.S. global market competition was ramped up in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Spring, 2008).

Kagarlitsky (2001) provides a useful explanation of the difference between classical liberalism and global neo-liberal policies stating, “globalisation [sic] does not mean the impotence of the state, but the rejection by the state of its social functions, in favor of repressive ones, and the ending of democratic freedoms” (cited in Hill, 2007, p. 112). At the same time, contrary to tenets of classical liberalism that suggest a rolling-back of state power so that private interests might flourish, contemporary capitalism “demands a strong state to promote its interests” (Hayek as cited in Hill, 2008, p. 110). Hence, the rise of “neo-liberalism,” or a newly revived economic liberalism that positions private enterprise and public government and services in partnership with one another (Ross & Gibson, 2007).

The function of government within a neoliberal capitalist society is not, in fact diminished, as people are often led to believe with the concurrent rhetoric of conservatives extolling desires to diminish government powers. Classical liberalism – *laissez-faire* - demands that the state “let private enterprise make profits relatively unhindered by legislation...and unhindered by tax costs of a welfare state,” while neoliberalism requires the state to be actively involved in promoting private corporate interests through weakening or repealing regulations and supporting conservative ideologies (Hill, 2007, p. 110). Furthermore, although governmental leadership in the White House and Congress has shifted back and forth between Republican and Democratic control, the economic policies of the United States have “remained firmly within a neoliberal ideology” (Kumashiro, 2008, p. 37).

Apple (2006) and Kumashiro (2008) comment on the complexity of defining the “players” in support of neoliberalism; participants are not easily separated into “Right” versus “Left” categories as individuals representing nearly all political ideologies are active in promoting or complacent within the neoliberal system. A vast majority of those traditionally associated with the “Left” (e.g. liberal Democrats) support economic liberalism, or freedom to pursue capitalist interests without restraints, along with their conservative counterparts. In addition, many critical theorists and neo-Marxists criticize liberals for “promoting a false consciousness, an ideological smoke screen, that is a cover for special political and economic interests and educational bureaucrats” (Gutek, 2004, p.175).

Michael Apple (2006) identifies four politically “Right” groups leading conservative educational agendas, though other researchers and theorists include additional groups as well (see overview in Kumashiro, 2008, p.9-12). As shown in Table 1, Apple (2006) classifies four categories of politically Right groups within the educational field. By recognizing that a full spectrum of people representing many political ideologies and public sectors are invested in supporting what many researchers describe as the neoliberal agenda, we can better understand the origins of specific public education policies and whose interests they aim to serve.

Table 1  
*Michael Apple’s Politically “Right” Groups in the Educational Field*

<b>“Right” Group</b>	<b>Group Values</b>
Neo-liberals	Competitive markets and freedom of individual choice
Neo-conservatives	“Back to basics” and traditional notions of discipline and knowledge
Authoritarian populists	Christian Right and belief that society and schools must be “saved”
Professional middle class	Centralized control and more rigorous standards and tests

Sources: Apple, 2006, pp. 19-23; and Kumashiro, 2008, p. 9

Even those who are not staunchly critical of capitalism would likely find fault in the extraordinary greed and growing economic disparity in the last 30 years. As is well documented by Hill (2007 & 2008) and Harvey (2006 & as cited in interview with Goodman & Gonzalez, 2009) economists have tracked the preposterous “wealth gap” between the richest and poorest individuals. For example, in the U.S., the top 1% of the nation’s wealthiest people have resources equal to the bottom 95% (Hill, 2007, p. 113). This unprecedented “economic apartheid” has developed incrementally since the 1970s, with its greatest growth spurt taking place in the 1990s under the Clinton Administration and the pursuance of global, free trade. For example, when

looking at the income of CEOs in comparison to the poorest groups in the United States, in 1970 the gap was roughly 30:1. In 1990, the gap increased to 60:1 and by 1998 this gap ballooned to 500:1 (Miyoshi, 2002 as cited in Hill, 2007, p.112).

Similarly, global economic gaps have grown exponentially over the last 30 years as well. According to Hill, "in 1900, the gap in per capita wealth between richest countries and the Third World was around 5:1 and in 1970 it was still only 7:1. By 1990, however, the gap had grown to 260-360:1 and in 2002 the wealth gap ratio was 470-500:1" (2007, p. 113). Furthermore, scientists, economists, and sociologists have documented the added ecological and social costs of unfettered capitalism. For example, the global, unregulated marketplace allows for vast human right abuses, horrific working conditions, and environmental destruction, with severe implications such as global climate change, depressed local economies, and social degradation (Brown, 2008; Castells, 1997/2004; Waring, 1999).

While knowledge of the vast inequalities between those who have wealth and resources and those who do not may be more or less common knowledge, what is surprising is the apparent acceptance of an economic system that legitimizes unfettered pursuance of unlimited wealth. It is within this climate where capitalistic pursuits are substantiated, and the purpose and policies surrounding education are shaped and transformed. When comments by policy makers that education must prepare "our children to compete in the global economy" (Obama & Biden, 2009, ¶ 1) are understood as existing within a system that perpetuates extreme inequities, we must question what "our children" will be asked to do when competing nationally and globally. What exactly is happening in the "workplace" that we must prepare them for? What social and environmental atrocities will they be expected to participate in (passively or actively)? However, most people do not question these capitalist practices, and instead position themselves and their children in the most advantageous opportunities, with little thought about what happens to others who do not benefit from, have access to, or take advantage of similar privileges.

To illustrate briefly with an example, arguments in favor of school vouchers and "choice" center around concerns of parents who want to be able to have their children go to the "best" school available. Instead of investing energy in trying to influence desired changes in their children's school(s) of origin, they push for the freedom to choose their child's educational destination. One of the primary reasons parents feel this urgency to choose the "right" school is precisely because they recognize that the resources and investments in schools are inherently unequal, and that the schools students attend are linked to important pathways to future economic viability. Those who oppose the use of public resources and services in this way argue that school "choice" disproportionately favors those with privileges and leaves behind those who do not to remain in struggling schools that will be further compromised by sanctions, declining enrollment, and chronic failing infrastructures after years of underfunding (Hill, 2008; Kumashiro, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Naomi Klein (2007) exposes how those who advocate and pursue unfettered capitalism such as Milton Friedman and his followers, are seizing market opportunities around the world when they are struck by ecological disasters, failed states, and depressed economies, which she calls "disaster capitalism." One prime example of this was the conservative, market-driven school reforms that took place in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Klein reports that three

months after the levees broke, at the age of 93 and with failing health, Friedman managed to write an op-ed piece in *The Wall Street Journal* in which he said, “Most new Orleans schools are in ruins, as are the homes of the children who attended them... This is a tragedy. It is also an opportunity to radically reform the education system” (p. 5). Friedman’s proposal was to have the government provide families with vouchers so students could attend private schools, many run for profit, instead of investing in the existing public schools. Friedman further contended that these changes should “not be a stopgap but rather ‘a permanent reform’” (N. Klein, 2007, p. 5). Following this, a network of conservative set about implementing Friedman’s plan, which the Bush administration funded with tens of millions of dollars to convert New Orleans schools into charter schools and provide vouchers for families. The New Orleans school reforms led by free-market, neoliberal ideologues clearly demonstrates the extent to which proponents desire to utilize government resources and power to invest in and secure private interests within the education system.

Klein further documents that this movement is grounded in decades of scholarship developed by Friedman at the University of Chicago School of Economics and is visible around the world, where private corporations are taking over disenfranchised communities that are wrecked from ecological disasters. Klein says Friedman and his followers have been “perfecting this very strategy: waiting for a major crisis, then selling off pieces of the state to private players while citizens were still reeling from the shock, then quickly making the ‘reforms’ permanent” (N. Klein, 2007, p.7). As will be discussed in depth later, as President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan clearly articulate ideas concerning education reform that reflect market-driven interests that have undoubtedly been informed by Friedman’s work.

Why is there such broad-based, mainstream acceptance of unfettered capitalism and the vast inequities and divisions of wealth it creates? McMuntry (1998) argues that the underlying ideological support for the global market system is its positioning as being synonymous with freedom and legitimized as the true “will of god” (p. 55). He claims that this perspective leads to the belief that neoliberalism is paramount to personal freedom and democracy, and that those who dissent from this view are militantly attacked. As a result, the system is sustained through compliance by ordinary citizens out of fear of social persecution and the realities of economic survival. Castells (1997/2004) similarly argues that globalization has forced individuals and nations to choose to participate in neoliberal and capitalist pursuits out of fear of being subsumed by the economic structure regardless of whether they choose it or not. In addition, a well-oiled propaganda machine has equated capitalism with freedom, and to question its legitimacy is considered un-democratic, or even, fascist (Bourdieu, 1998; Giroux, 2004). Harvey suggests that social positioning and competition is a direct by-product of neoliberalism, as it is “designed to achieve the restoration of class power” (as cited by Hill, 2008, p. xvi). Furthermore, we can see that as fears concerning survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century continue to grow, individuals more or less accept social class so long as they are able to assume positions over others.

Bourdieu’s (1998) analysis of neoliberalism is also informative here, in particular, his claim that the “strength of neo-liberal ideology is that it is based on a kind of social neo-Darwinism” (p. 42). Drawing a connection to Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882) concept of survival of the fittest, Bourdieu argues that neoliberals frequently espouse a belief of entitlement to appropriate unlimited amounts of wealth regardless of method or repercussions, which one is free to take

advantage of when given the opportunity. This plays right into the Protestant work ethic adopted as a core American value suggesting that those who are “successful” have earned their rewards through hard work and sacrifice (Obama, 2006; Spring, 2008). As Kumashiro (2008) argues, these expectations, when extended to education suggest that if students are provided the exact same educational content (through standardization), held to the same expectations (through accountability), and assessed in exactly the same manner (through standardized tests) then those who “fail” did so at their own hand, ensuring that those most capable reap benefits and rewards.

To summarize the implications of this analysis on the contemporary education system, it can be argued that the educational reforms set forth by policy makers over the last quarter century, are steeped in a political agenda rife with capitalistic interests, dependent upon a populace that conforms to its requirements and accepts its inequities, and wears a face of altruistic intent in the public spotlight.

### **Neo-liberal Ideology & Marketplace Mentality in Schools**

Countering many mainstream ideas legitimizing capitalism and its function throughout society, is the analysis from educators and researchers who position issues concerning education reform as being intricately connected to and influenced by global neoliberal policies (e.g. Apple, 2006; Gabbard, 2008; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007; Ross & Gibson, ed., 2007). Central to their critique is the contention that neoliberal ideologies facilitate a view that schools should be market-driven and that education itself should advance capitalist values. This is best illustrated by the greatly enhanced role of private interests and management within the public education system. For example, *No Child Left Behind* (2001) greatly enhanced federal government's role in educational policies, while at the same time, developed a system based on standards, accountability, and choice leading to significant involvement of private companies in developing curriculum, tests, tutoring programs, and even privately operated, public charter schools (Apple, 2006; Kumashiro, 2008; Hursh, 2007). Although many critique the law and various aspects of its application, very few critics within the mainstream point to, or even question, the market-driven ideology it is infused with. In fact, there is palpable support for enhancing aspects of the law traditionally associated with the private sector, such as having teacher merit-based salaries, supporting efficiency and industrial models and routines, and expanding charter schools (Duncan, 2009; Obama & Biden, n.d.; Spring, 2008).

Economic investment opportunities within education for the private sector are enormous, especially given the historical instability of capitalism and the need to continually expand market options (Brosio, 2007; Lipman, 2007). For example, international spending on education is estimated to be “2,000 billion dollars more than global automotive sales” (Santos, 2004, as cited by Hill, 2008, p. xvii – xviii). Americans are well-accustomed to the privatizing of public services, as contemporary generations grow up in an era in which privatized health care is the only option, disaster response is handled by private contract, and our prisons and the military are operated and outfitted by private companies (Hill, 2008; Klein, N., 2007; Lipman, 2007).

Neoliberal tenets and practices are explicitly and implicitly entrenched within multiple facets of schools (Hill, 2007) to the extent that we may find very little that takes place within schools is independent of private sector involvement. While we can expect that as instrumental facets of

society, schools will always occupy a position that serves and is served by the social, cultural, and economic systems within this country, it is also our duty as citizens within a democracy to examine, question, and contribute to the development of those public goods and spaces. The following section examines the role of the federal government in legitimizing educational policies that support neoliberalism.

### **Federal Government Role in Education**

Over the last twenty-five years, we have seen a greatly increased role of the federal government in education, where previous generations held much more local control (Schneider & Keesler, 2007; Spring, 2008). While many of these advances have directly led to greater access to educational options for students, especially among those from different cultural, social, and economic groups and varying levels of ability, along with it has come an intensification of the emphasis of schools as being intricately connected to shaping a globally-competitive workforce (Spring, 2008). As previously discussed, many critical educators and theorists question the positioning of public education within an ideological framework that advances neoliberal tenets and allows for market-driven competition within schools. Given this critique, we must pay attention to what students are being prepared to do, what beliefs and ideologies are influencing their perspectives, and what purposes their lives are being facilitated to serve.

As previously discussed, the 1983 release of the federal report, *A Nation at Risk*, framed the debate that schools within the U.S. were failing (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Kumashiro, 2008). In addition to positioning education clearly at the center of economic interests, it initiated an era of standardization and high-stakes testing evident today (Kumashiro, 2008). Its primary recommendations focused on supporting conservative, essentialist educational practices that called for increasing the role of federal and state government involvement in determining and designing standardization, improving the teaching profession, and increasing time spent in school (Bracey, 2003; National Commission on Excellence in Education). Furthermore, it served to overshadow other, more extensive and sound educational research studies that were more progressive in nature (e.g., *A Place Called School* (Goodlad, 1984/2005) and the *8-year Study* (Aikin as cited in Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The report was a successful entrée to the current level of government involvement in nationwide school reform efforts, solidifying practices that have increasingly involved public and private partnerships. As will be shown, Obama's educational agenda does not stray far from the recommendations in this report.

Two decades of testing and standards initiated by *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR) was ramped up in the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) era. NCLB greatly increased the federal government's role in national education and is blessed for its wide bi-partisan support (Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007; Schneider & Keesler, 2007). Since implementation, NCLB has met great public and political controversy, with few finding the law without significant flaws (e.g. Darling-Hammond, 2007; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007). Similarly, despite the ease with which people criticize and blame George W. Bush for his role in introducing the flailing legislation, frequently glossed over is that the original frameworks for NCLB were developed under the Clinton Administration by democratic appointees and staff and co-sponsored by Democratic Party members of the Congress (Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007; Spring, 2008).

As we look forward to the future of this legislation and the over-arching role of the federal government in education, it is useful to examine some of the critique and commentary concerning NCLB in its current form and what is known about Obama and his administration's plans for revising the legislation.

### **No Child Left Behind and the Standardization of Education**

With the passage of the 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act*, which was the reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) and focused attention on Title 1 schools, the federal government established new laws and policies in a stated effort to eliminate the "achievement gap" between students of different socio/economic backgrounds by holding schools, teachers, and youth accountable for their success. Since its inception, this law has been widely critiqued by educators and researchers, and several studies have shown that many of the policies and practices have actually increased inequality and inequities among youth (e.g. Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Hursh, 2007; Lipman, 2007; Lipman & Haines, 2007). Researches and scholars (e.g. Apple, 2006; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007) have examined the core tenets of the law and comment on the ways in which standardization, accountability, and choice "undermine democratic purposes of public education, intensify inequality, and bring schools increasingly under the economic and cultural domination of corporations" (Lipman, 2007, p. 36). However, NCLB has succeeded as an educational policy precisely because it speaks to real issues, primarily those facing low-income youth of color (Lipman, 2007).

Though there is not enough space to discuss in great depth the many facets of NCLB that pertain to this discussion concerning the impact of neoliberalism on the education system, there are several key aspects of the law that Obama and his administration have addressed, which will be the focus for the remainder of this paper. As stated on the U.S. Department of Education's website, the "four pillars" of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002 is "based on stronger accountability for results, more freedom for states and communities, proven education methods, and more choices for parents...Under *No Child Left Behind*, states are working to close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency" (2007, ¶ 1-2). Obama's education agenda, we will see, does not diverge from these core goals.

Mainstream attitudes concerning the effectiveness of NCLB is summed up well by Education Week, "although the overall goal of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is the right one – ensuring that all children can meet high standards – the law has significant flaws that need to be addressed" (2009, p. 26). A majority of people accept the intent of NCLB even amidst a great deal of criticism. However, it is my assessment that critique offered is often targeted towards isolated aspects of the law and/or its implementation as opposed to more comprehensive and thorough analyses of multiple facets of the law and the ideologies it promotes and serves.

The bipartisan nature and history of NCLB certainly parallel's Obama's political platform in which he strives towards collaboration (and compromise) across party lines (Obama, 2006). Among his proposals for reforms within federal educational policies, Obama and representatives from his administration have commented on plans to reform NCLB in several ways, however, specific descriptions and concrete plans are still to be determined.

## Section Summary

Throughout the history of education in this country, the education system has been formed and informed by the political and ideological beliefs of those who are in positions of power. Schools have sustained their role in ideological management, functioning to assimilate and inculcate each generation of young people with particular ideas and experiences that serve to shape their beliefs and future opportunities as citizens. As noted in the introduction, which ideas and according to whose ideology, has been a debate and issue since the inception of formal schooling in this country (Spring, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Increasingly over the last 30 years, the federal government basically established a nationalized education system, promoting policies and legislation that serve traditionally conservative and essentialist pedagogical practices that enhanced attention on preparing students to compete in the global economy. As neoliberalism has emerged as the dominant economic policies of U.S., schools have transformed under the influence of market-driven ideologies and free-market opportunities.

As a result of civil rights victories, over time access to public schooling in the U.S. has increased for previously disenfranchised populations, in particular youth of color, females, and youth with disabilities. Despite this, contemporary schools produce vast disparities in educational access, opportunities, and outcomes among students that represent particular socio-cultural-economic backgrounds. As a result, schools continue to function as hegemonic institutions, privileging some students at the cost of many. Critical theorists and scholars argue that the disparities experienced by youth are the result of a school system housed within and governed by neoliberal ideologies and practices. Under the competitive system that plays out within and outside of schools, those most socially- and economically- disadvantaged are least likely to benefit from the education system as it is structured.

As we move into a new era of leadership under President Barack Obama and his Administration, we can assess his policies and proposals against those established by his predecessors. In particular, the analysis that follows examines key aspects of his proposed and implemented education agenda, as it looks within the first 100 days in office.

### **Part III: Findings**

#### **Obama Presidency – Hope and Change or More of the Same?**

*In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a pre-requisite. Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation. And half of the students who begin college never finish. This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow.*

- President Barack Obama in his address to Joint Session of Congress, February 24, 2009

Among the marks in history that Obama will leave as President will be his leadership in educational reforms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In just under 100 days in office, Obama has kept his promise to support a variety of initiatives that cross political divides (Obama, 2006) such as supporting public policies that attempt to blend “Right-wing” interests (advancement of charter schools) with “Left-wing” demands (increased public funding for education). Furthermore, his authenticity and transparency in his written work regarding his views about race and privilege provide a refreshing (if not revealing) subtext to his role as a leader in this nation (Obama, 2006). It is difficult to imagine one not becoming infected with the dream he inspires after learning about his history, and more specifically, understanding his thoughtful reflections of his experiences and how they uniquely contribute to his role as a President. However, these very qualities also put him in the “hot seat,” as the public recognizes that his decisions are not made out of ignorance, but are in fact deliberate and intentional (Davey D, 2009).

Those who have read his autobiographies see that this approach to leadership grows out of personal and professional experiences throughout his life that afforded him opportunities to see across traditional barriers and boundaries, the most obvious example being his multi-racial/ethnic heritage and family (Obama, 1995/2004 & 2006). However, it is also clear that Obama is shaped by his professional encounters prior to his work in public office, including a stint right out of college in the corporate sector, which he eventually gave up in order to pursue his dreams in community organizing (Obama, 1995/2004). It is through these experiences in Chicago that the foundation for his bipartisan political positions were established (Obama, 2006). In his book, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) Obama describes his personal, professional, and political maneuverings to bridge gaps he chronicles over generations of governmental changing of the guards in an effort to address what he calls a case of “arrested development” in U.S. politics (p. 44). In his first two months in office, the balancing act of serving interests across the political spectrum is obvious, with critics beginning to emerge from all sides (e.g. Broder, 2009).

Although critical theorists help explain political ideologies by naming the positions and persuasions of the players, Obama is attempting to dismantle traditional binary positions and relationships within government (Obama, 2006). Because Obama is African American, there are many assumptions that people may make about the kind of leader he will be and the policies he will establish. For example, liberal/progressive people may wish to believe that he will prioritize

policies to address issues affecting people of color and low-income people to a greater extent than his White, affluent, male predecessors. Obama, however, has tried to distance himself from aligning to particular identity politics or traditionally liberal or progressive ideas (Obama, 2006).

So far, Obama's key education reform proposals have met mixed reception and some are beginning to publically challenge his agenda (e.g. Broder, 2009; Luzer, 2009; Robelen, 2009). Those concerned about the increasing privatization of public schools see reflections of the neoliberal educational agenda in Obama's policies (e.g., see Kumashiro, 2009; Lipman, 2009), while those supportive of teacher merit-based systems of pay, standardization and accountability measures, and charter schools are right at home (e.g., Education Week, 2009b).

Furthermore, though most in the mainstream press praise Obama's selection of Arne Duncan as Education Secretary (e.g., Cook, 2009), his reputation for his work in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is widely debated and criticized (e.g., Lipman & Haines, 2007; Kumashiro, 2009; Schmidt, 2008). Obama's proposed changes to future iterations of NCLB and other educational policies appear to more-or-less mirror CPS school system reforms of the last few years, which as critical educators and scholars have documented are not demonstrating the results often touted in mainstream media (e.g. Brown & Gustein, 2009; Kumashiro, 2009; Lipman, 2009).

As will be discussed further, some of the controversial reforms Obama and Duncan favor include: maintaining a high-stakes accountability system including an emphasis on outcomes-based assessments and standardized tests, strengthening academic standards nationally, funding the rapid expansion of charter schools, extending the amount of time students are in school, rewarding schools that demonstrate "excellence," and introducing teacher merit-based salaries (Blitzer, 2009; Cook, 2009; Obama & Biden, n.d.; Obama, 2009e).

The nation is watching and waiting to see whether promise becomes reality, and whether his bipartisan positions will favor more politically conservative or progressive values and objectives. In addition, those cognizant and critical of capitalism are assessing the degree to which the neoliberal agenda will influence educational policies (e.g. Kumashiro, 2009; Lipman, 2009). I have found that there is also a palpable discomfort among Obama supporters to critique or question his positions and policies, particularly because he has inspired so much hope and embodies the dreams unrealized by previous generations. There is clearly a risk in this kind of idolatry in which the public more or less blindly accepts the positions of our leaders, failing to hold them accountable for their actions (Smiley & Robinson, 2009). It is in the light of holding Obama to his expectation of citizens to be active in shaping our democracy that I analyze his education agenda. In his words, "What is required now is for this country to pull together, confront boldly the challenges we face, and take responsibility for our future once more," (Obama, 2009d).

### **Deconstructing Obama's views of Leadership, Capitalism, Race**

As the first person of color to become President of the United States, Obama is in a unique position to be examined from the perspective of Friere's (1970) theories of leadership and power. Though there is not space to explore these ideas in depth, I could not help but be drawn towards examining Obama's words and actions through Friere's lens. I will offer briefly here

some of the concepts I pondered. In his books, Obama (1995/2004; 2006) is quite transparent about his struggle with race and identity and it is not difficult to accept and admire his ability to transcend barriers that others uphold. The manner in which these experiences shaped him is evident in his leadership style as a community organizer and as President. One of the ways he describes his style as a leader (and what he looks for in others) is as being somehow neutral, in-between, collaborative, and non-ideological (2006).

However, I wonder if by positioning himself in these ways, is he merely assuming the only acceptable role that a Black president could take, and as such, may be compromising his authentic vision towards liberation for himself and other people of color? Furthermore, is Obama merely demonstrating a conscious or unconscious “adhesion to the oppressor” as theorized by Freire (1970, p. 30)? By aligning his political ideologies to those policies that have historically oppressed people of color and those socioeconomically disadvantaged (such as continuing to fund corporate welfare, and as will be discussed, supporting high stakes testing) is he positioning himself in the role of oppressor, instead of continuing the path as an activist from his earlier years as a community organizer? Furthermore, even though Obama's speeches and written work speak to the needs of the disenfranchised, Freire argues that pursuing liberation cannot be “purely intellectual” but must involve “actions” and “serious reflection” (p. 52). I wonder if those in positions of power (namely corporate and international political leaders) will make it impossible for Obama to match his thoughtful, reflective intellect and inspiring speeches with real liberatory action. As Obama's approach to leadership unfolds, we will see whether his ideals concerning true collaboration amount to serious action towards liberating the oppressed.

It is clear from Obama's writing, speeches, and policies that he believes in capitalism (e.g. Obama 2006 & 2009c). Surprisingly absent from his commentary in *Audacity of Hope* (2006, pp. 162-230) is acknowledgement of how capitalism has used people of color, women, and children throughout history to serve the interests and privileges of those with power (Zinn, 1995). Although he addresses issues concerning race directly in other parts of his books (for example see Obama, 2006, pp. 269-319) his overview of some of the most significant triumphs in government investments in areas that supported capitalist markets, surprisingly obfuscates the fact that a majority of the public works projects were developed on the backs of slaves, poor immigrants, women and other marginalized people. Instead, he celebrates America's ideological vision that “anyone who works hard and takes responsibility will have a chance at a better life” (Obama, 2006, pp. 188). He further legitimizes this ideal declaring “This idea of social mobility constituted one of the great early bargains of American capitalism; industrial and commercial capitalism might lead to greater instability, but it would be a dynamic system in which anyone with enough energy and talent could rise to the top” (Obama, 2006, p. 179). The validity of this claim is repeatedly called into question by disenfranchised people who experience barriers as a result of their skin color, ethnicity, sex, class, gender expression, ability, and sexual orientation among other traits marginalized by those with authority and power (Apple, 2006; Zinn, 1995).

In Obama's discussion about race, he comments, “I have never had the option of restricting my loyalties on the basis of race, or measuring my worth on the basis of tribe” because of his multi-cultural family (Obama, 2006, p. 274). He continues, “To say that we are one people is not to suggest that race no longer matters – that the fight for equality has been won, or that the problems that minorities face in the country today are largely self-inflicted” (p. 275). Instead, he

says that one must “see the world on a split screen – to maintain in our sights the kind of America that we want while looking squarely at America as it is, to acknowledge the sins of the past and the challenges of the present without becoming trapped in cynicism or despair” (p. 276). This statement provides insight not only into Obama's thoughts about race and racism, but is also evident in his political ideologies in other areas. It does seem that Obama is working with a “split screen” vision, one which attempts to balance competing ideas and points of view. However, because opposing views and issues are not equal, and because positions with more power behind them are going to have greater influence, to believe that they can be weighed and judged simultaneously is problematic. Though he comments on forms of institutionalized racism and nods towards efforts to address systemic inequities (e.g. affirmative action policies), he suggests moving towards policies that are not defined by characteristics such as race. This approach may serve to undermine existing, endemic inequities rooted in institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other forms of inequity. It is useful to examine Obama's beliefs concerning economic ideologies and perspectives on race, class, and privilege in this country because, as discussed in the first part of this paper, schools are heavily influenced by these issues and serve to reinforce and reproduce prevailing ideologies and the status quo.

### **Deconstructing Obama's Proposals to be “Non-Ideologically”-Based**

Obama repeatedly makes statements concerning his view for the need to move away from “ideological battles,” especially those that are in his words “as outdated as they are predictable” (2006, p. 190). Instead, he is looking for a “mix of policies [that] will lead to a dynamic free market and widespread economic security, entrepreneurial innovation, and upward mobility” (p. 188). This is the heart of his push towards bipartisanship, selecting those issues and initiatives that will serve the majority, while attempting to not compromise the rights of minorities. This line of thinking is problematic for education in two key ways; first, although school reform efforts may be drawn from different political or ideological perspectives, as discussed in Part II, there are always particular interests being served by political decisions, most frequently those that favor people in positions of power. Second, as will be addressed, Obama's education agenda thus far parallels many of the reforms of his predecessors, namely those rooted in essentialist and neoliberal ideologies.

As I described earlier, neoliberal policies are embraced across political ideologies. Since education is not separate from our social and economic policies, but rather, is a reflection of the institutions and systems that influence it, any complete analysis of educational policies includes examination of these socio-political forces and their subsequent evidence within schools. Due to space limitations, I will limit my focus to a few selected educational issues and proposed policies of the Obama administration that reflect and align with neoliberalism.

### **Obama's Economic Policies – Neoliberalism Clarified**

Obama's educational policies are clearly steeped in and, some might say, driven by his view of economics. As previously discussed, this is not a departure from the role and view of the purpose of education throughout the history of this country as being intricately tied to economic development and advancement within the United States. In his book, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) Obama lays out his view of government's role within a capitalist society, providing a

brief historical review of the nation's leaders and the decisions they made at critical junctures in their time of office. He concisely discusses the advancement of the free market society, carefully highlighting the role of Democrats and Republicans in pursuing a global, economic agenda. Reiterating many of his ideas in his first formal speech focused on the topic of education, Obama clearly articulates his view of the interconnectedness of the global economy and education:

For we know that economic progress and educational achievement have always gone hand in hand in America...The source of America's prosperity has never been merely how ably we accumulate wealth, but how well we educate our people. This has never been more true than it is today. In a 21st-century world where jobs can be shipped wherever there's an Internet connection...where your best job qualification is not what you do, but what you know -- education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity and success, it's a prerequisite for success. (Obama, 2009e, p. 5-6)

As Obama's comments clearly demonstrate, he situates goals of education squarely with economic needs. As in previous generations, this ideology supports strengthening private/public partnerships in education. Given the strength and power of industry and the comparative insecurity of schools, opportunities for business interests and influence to overtake other school praxis is likely. Kozol (2005) sums up the complexity of these issues well:

Admittedly, the economic needs of a society are bound to be reflected to some rational degree within the policies and purposes of public schools. But, even so, most of us are inclined to ask, there must be *something* more to life as it is lived by six-year-olds or ten-year-olds, or by teenagers for that matter, than concerns about "successful global competition." Childhood is not merely basic training for utilitarian adulthood. It should have some claims upon our mercy, not for its future value to the economic interests of competitive societies but for its present value as a perishable piece of life itself. (p. 94)

Furthermore, enhancing the focus of career development in schools is frequently carried out with little critique concerning reasons why disparities exist in the first place. One reason educators support students' engagement in workforce preparation is the urgent recognition that without job related skills and experiences it is likely that they will not lead self-sufficient or economically viable lives within the capitalist system (New Ways to Work, 2007; Seltzer, 2007; Wald & Martinez, 2003). Therefore, educators focus their efforts on doing whatever they can to support young people in participating in the system as it is, with little or no energy directed towards questioning the economic system itself. At the same time, the capitalistic system that thrives on disparities in income and ability level ensures that a system where a few corporate entrepreneurs reap the benefits on the backs of millions of others remains intact (Hill, 2007 & 2008). This in turn maintains an economic system in which some may gain access, but a majority of people will always be left out because capitalism necessitates it (Marx & Engles, 1848/2005).

Obama repeatedly states his belief in the benefits and virtues of capitalism and in free markets, seeing them as the best way to support all U.S. citizens (Obama, 2006). He also supports government's role in ensuring that people benefit from their labors and are protected in the workplace (Obama, 2006). He shares a view with many in the inevitability of a U.S. capitalist economy, as is evidenced by this statement: "In our standard economics textbooks and in our

modern political debates, laissez-faire is the default rule; anyone who would challenge it swims against the prevailing tide” (Obama, 2006, p. 178). He also notes the validity of capitalism’s endurance by stating, “The bankruptcy of communism and socialism as alternative means of economic organization has only reinforced [the] assumption,” that government “intrusion” in the market “undermines private enterprise and inhibits economic growth” (pp. 177-178). Some critical theorists and scholars, especially neo-Marxists, (Gasper, Ed., 2005; Mc Laren, 2003) argue, however, that we have not truly seen a “pure” communist society – that those countries that have employed communist ideology have been appropriated by dictators and not governed by the people. While some argue that social justice reforms will not come about until the economic system changes, Obama believes in shaping a capitalist economic system based on “what works,” blending investments in the infrastructure of government-funded programs and services, and reforming the role of government in the marketplace (Obama, 2006 & 2009e).

It is clear from Obama’s discussions concerning the global economy, as well as in the policies he has set forth in the last couple of months, that he does not have classical beliefs concerning capitalism, namely, that of an uninvolved government such as that which his predecessors sought to implement. Rather, he sees that “an active national government has...been indispensable in dealing with economic failures – those recurring snags in any capitalist system that either inhibit the efficient workings of the market or result in harm to the public” (Obama, 2006, p. 181). In this way, Obama seems to align well with Hayek’s description of the differences between traditional laissez-faire capitalism and neoliberalism (as cited in Hill, 2007), specifically his view of government’s role and responsibility to support the interests of the market place. One might say that Obama’s economic policies are clarifying the role that government can play in preserving capitalism, contrary to conservatives’ insistence in government stepping out of the way. Furthermore, the blended approach of supporting private, free market practice, while at the same time, restoring government’s role in regulation, investments in infrastructure and support of social policies, may lead to a form of economics and government leadership entirely new to anything yet seen. As his economic proposals over the last few months have shown, Obama is leading the government in purchasing shares in private companies, essentially taking public dollars and investing in private enterprise to save them from collapse. One key question remains, however: Will these changes amount to a sustainable capitalism that benefits a majority of the people in the nation and globally?

It is important to note that Obama has not glossed over the consequences of global capitalism. As he stated, “...there’s also no denying that globalization has greatly increased economic instability for millions of ordinary Americans. To stay competitive and keep investors happy in the global marketplace, U.S.-based companies have automated, downsized, outsourced, and offshored....The result has been the emergence of what some call a ‘winner-take-all’ economy, in which a rising tide doesn’t necessarily lift all boats” (Obama, 2006, p. 172–173).

His solution to addressing this crisis is a national commitment to “taking tough steps” to make America more competitive and national consensus around the “appropriate role of government in the marketplace” (p. 176). Obama’s views and actions in economic policy mirror many of his ideas concerning the education system. As will be shown, he values strong relationships between both systems, advancing private-public partnerships and system reforms tied to economic values.

### Obama's Ideological Leanings & Plans for U.S. Education Policy

Prior to and through his election as president, Obama has remained clear about his interest in supporting a number of educational policies and reforms that do not deviate far from the work of his predecessors. Furthermore, he has selected an Educational Secretary, Arne Duncan, who shares his perspectives and has implemented similar policies at the city level, as Superintendent of Chicago Public Schools. I will address specific areas of Obama's education agenda, in particular, elements with the most bearing on issues addressed by critical theorists concerning the impact of neoliberalism on education, which include: policies intended to address the "achievement gap," including proposed modifications to accountability measures and assessments under NCLB, increasing attention on career readiness standards, and proposals to expand charter schools. See also Appendix A for an overview of key elements of Obama's education agenda, in particular, those that pertain to this analysis.

Barack Obama's educational agenda and policy proposals in many ways reflect and support neoliberal economic policies, capitalist ideology, and American values of meritocracy. In his discussions concerning schools and educational policies in his autobiography, in many of his public speeches since taking office, and in various policy statements, whenever he has addressed issues of education, it is always in the context of supporting the global economy (Obama, 2009a & 2009b & 2009e; Obama & Biden, n.d.). This illustrates Obama's orientation of education's primary goal of supporting economic development for individuals and for the country as a whole. As previously discussed, Obama is carrying the torch of his predecessors, echoing (in more ways than one) the reasons and the methods proposed in 1983 with *A Nation at Risk*.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) analysis of the impact of capitalism in education is informative here, in their claim that "As long as one does not question the structure of the economy itself, the current structure of schools seems eminently rational" (p. 9). As I discussed earlier, Obama is supportive of capitalism and free markets, exemplifying a neoliberal attitude in his view of government involvement in the economic system. As such, we can broadly see that Obama's ideas concerning educational policies are an extension of his economic policies and aim to transform schools in ways that will support global competitiveness.

In addition, Obama favors educational policies that, as he says, do not reflect any particular ideological standpoint, but rather support "those reforms that have the highest impact on student achievement" (Obama, 2006, p.191) and "what works" (Obama, 2009e). Critical theorists, however, argue that we cannot divorce education from ideology (Apple, 2006; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Fuller, 2009; Kumashiro, 2008). Furthermore, as I intend to show, there is great controversy concerning "hard evidence of reforms that work" (Obama, 2006, p. 191) especially in regards to the most pervasive contemporary reforms of standardization, high stakes testing, and accountability (Hursh, 2004; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007).

Obama commits to funding education adequately, while also eliminating "those programs that don't produce results" (Obama, 2006, p. 191). One of Obama's biggest criticisms of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) was the Bush Administration's failure to adequately fund the legislation, while holding teachers and administrators accountable to outcomes (Education Week, 2009b). So far, Obama has made bold steps to follow through with this commitment, through his economic

stimulus package and its substantial investment in education, more than doubling the investment made by the Bush administration in 2008 (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b).

Current proposals for funding education programs in the economic stimulus package under the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009* (ARRA) have earmarked \$115 billion out of \$787 billion total for education-related programs and investments (Klein A., 2009b). As shown in Table 2, primary educational investments in the ARRA apply a majority of funds (just over \$53 billion) to state fiscal-stabilization, including just under \$40 billion states can use to avert layoffs of staff and cutbacks. In addition, over \$25 billion is allocated to support student college access through increasing Pell Grants (U.S. Department of Education, 2009a). Another \$5 billion to be used as incentive “bonus” grants for meeting “key performance measures” and dispersed at the discretion of Education Secretary Duncan (Klein A., 2009b).

**Table 2: American Recovery & Reinvestment Act of 2009 – Education Funding Allocations**

<b>ARRA Proposed Education Aid</b>	<b>Proposed amount</b>	<b>2008 Actual</b>	<b>Difference</b>
State fiscal-stabilization fund	\$53.6 billion	n/a	+ \$5.6 billion
Title I	\$13 billion	\$13.9 billion	- \$ .9 billion
Special education (IDEA)	\$12.2 billion	\$11.7 billion	+ \$ .5 billion
Educational Technology State Grants	\$900 million	\$267.5 billion	+ \$632.5 billion
Vocational rehabilitation	\$540 million	\$2.87 billion	- \$2.3 billion
Federal Work-study	\$200 million	\$980.5 million	- \$780.5 million
Independent Living State Grants	\$18.2 million	\$22.2 million	- \$4 million
Services for older individuals who are blind	\$34.3 million	\$32.3 million	+ 2 million
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$77.2 billion</b>	<b>\$29.8 billion</b>	<b>+ 47.4 billion</b>
Federal Pell Grants	\$25.2 billion	\$18 billion	+ 7.2 billion

Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2009a

In addition, the President's proposed federal budget includes a modest increase in spending in education, totaling \$46.2 (2009) and \$46.7 billion (2010), up from \$45 billion in 2008, and the ARRA will add to this. A portion of the funding will go to expand charter schools. Furthermore, Obama proposed significant funding in other federal departments that serve youth, including increasing health coverage for children and expanding national service programs through the Americorps (National Collaboration for Youth, 2009). Although educators across the country are relieved that Obama is making these proposed investments in education, as will be addressed later, the nation's schools are struggling to survive an educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006 & 2008) that will take much more than these modest investments to get out of. Furthermore, the National Education Association estimates that it will cost \$322 billion to bring the nation's schools in good repair (a cited in American Society of Civil Engineers, 2009).

### **Arne Duncan – Education Secretary**

Barack Obama's appointment of Arne Duncan as Education Secretary met mixed reactions and opinions, although most of what has been printed in the press reflects praise for his selection (for example, see Cook, 2009). Those who support Duncan, such as Senator Edward Kennedy, regard him as an innovative leader in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), while others (e.g., Kumashiro, 2009; Lipman, 2009) criticize him for his involvement in controversial educational reforms, such as strong support for student/parent “choice” via charter schools, alternative teacher

compensation through merit pay, and strong accountability measures (Cook, 2009; Hoff & Klein, 2009; Kumashiro, 2009).

Upon announcing his recommendation for appointment, President Obama commented that Duncan is "...not beholden to any one ideology...He's championed good charter schools – even when it was controversial. He's shut down failing schools and replaced their entire staffs – even when it was unpopular" (as cited in Cook, 2009, p.7). In another public speech, describing Duncan's leadership in education, Obama said "...Duncan will use only one test when deciding what ideas to support with your precious tax dollars: It's not whether an idea is liberal or conservative, but whether it works" (2009, p. 15) However, critics of the types of reforms that Duncan (and Obama) support would be far from calling them "nonideological" – in fact, as will be discussed, the roots of these kinds of reforms reflect strong ideological positions, primarily those that support neoliberalism and privatization.

His seven-year history as the Chief Executive Officer within CPS has been a focus of research and critique among scholars and critical educators for a number of years prior to and since his appointment (e.g., Ayers & Klonsky, 2006; Kumashiro, 2009; Lipman & Haines, 2007). In order to better understand the experiences that Duncan is bringing to this position, it is useful to briefly review the major changes that have happened in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) over the last 14 years. (For an extensive study of CPS school reforms, see Lipman & Haines, 2007).

Chicago Public Schools urban education reforms have been in the national spotlight, in particular over the last five years, with their Renaissance 2010 (Ren2010) initiative. The Ren2010 plan, established in June 2004 by Mayor Daley and previously supervised under former Chicago Chief Executive Office of Education, Arne Duncan, calls for the closing of 60 to 70 public schools by the year 2010, and the opening of 100 new schools, 2/3 of which will be charter or charter-like "contract" schools (Brown & Gustain, 2009; Lipman & Haines, 2007). Supporters of Ren2010 have stated that the goal of the plan is to save students who are "trapped in failing schools" (Duncan, 2006, p. 458) by increasing "parental choice and [instigating] meaningful competitive pressure on chronically failing neighborhood schools" (Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, as cited in Lipman & Haines, 2007, p. 472).

So far, 75 new schools have been opened in CPS, many of which are charter schools that serve 6-7% fewer low-income students, half as many limited-English-proficient students, and statistically significant fewer students with special needs than regular public neighborhood schools (Brown & Gustain, 2009). This clearly demonstrates arguments by critics that charter schools serve to benefit the privileged rather than, as is often proclaimed, serve the needs of the disenfranchised (Hill, 2008; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman & Haines, 2007). Furthermore, 61 Chicago public schools were closed or "turned around" – where, "all faculty and staff are dismissed, and future hiring and management decisions are outsourced to private concerns" (Brown & Gustain, 2009). Further, those who lost their jobs are disproportionately people of color (Lipman & Haines, 2007). In addition, more than a third of the new charters are in communities that are not, in fact, high-need (Schmidt, 2008) or are being developed under city-wide gentrification efforts (Lipman & Haines, 2007). During Duncan's tenure in CPS, district-wide high school test scores did not rise, and most of the lowest-performing high schools saw scores drop (Kumashiro, 2009; Schmidt, 2008). All of these issues are not isolated to the circumstances of CPS school reforms

under Ren2010, they in fact serve as examples of the primary arguments critiquing the charter movement (to be discussed further below).

It is important to analyze reforms of CPS because, as noted by several scholars (Brown & Gustein, 2009; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007; Lipman & Haines, 2007), the school policies they set forth in 1995 provided a model for the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. In particular, the CPS system of high stakes testing, standardization, accountability, and centralized regulation of teachers and schools provided a model for NCLB, as noted by President Clinton (Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007).

It is well substantiated that public schools in Chicago have historically failed to provide an equitable education for African American, Latino, and low-income students of all backgrounds (Kozol, 1991 & 2005; Lipman & Haines, 2007). However, as noted by Lipman and Haines (2007) "CPS responded with an accountability system that institutionalized a simplistic, one-size-fits-all practice of demarcating students, teachers, and schools into those deemed "failing" or "successful" and then meted out penalties without regard for inequities in resources, opportunities to learn, teacher's ideologies, cultural disconnections in curriculum and instruction, social contexts of the school, or strengths children bring to the school setting" (p. 479). Critics argue that many of the practices initiated in Chicago (and some other key areas of the country, such as Texas) that informed the policies under NCLB, directly contributed to the flaws and failures of the law and its implementation (Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007; Lipman & Haines, 2007). In spite of research demonstrating that these reforms have not led to significant improvement for students in test scores or other measures, CPS is repeatedly heralded as a success (for example, see Viadero (2008) in *Education Week*, Ed., 2009, pp. 52-56).

Furthermore, and more importantly, critics argue that these school reforms were developed less for altruistic reasons concerning better serving students and improving education, but rather to serve private interests (Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007; Lipman & Haines, 2007). Applying Naomi Klein's (2007) analysis here, we see that the crisis in failing public schools prompted the "shock" needed to invest and totally reform public schools with a neoliberal agenda in tact, including privatizing schools, undermining student and teacher rights.

Ren2010 is the next step in the evolution of Chicago's school reform plan, and as such, provides a model for the direction of future iterations of NCLB, especially under Duncan's leadership. Lipman and Haines (2007) argue that the progression of the policies established in 1995, which led up to the development of Ren2010, were predictable; public schools were not able to meet accountability measures under NCLB, providing supporters of school choice the evidence needed to encourage the development of charter schools. They further argue that, contrary to the publicized goals to lower the dropout rate and raise teacher and principal quality (Duncan, 2006), Ren2010 is "part of a neoliberal corporate and financial urban agenda of gentrification," being rolled out in neighborhoods and schools across Chicago (p. 471).

Also of significance is that two-thirds of the schools under Ren2010 are marked to be run by private organizations and staffed by non-union teachers and employees (Ayers & Klonsky, 2006; Lipman & Haines, 2007). Furthermore, as noted by Lipman and Haines (2007) the development of Ren2010 coincided with the release of a report issued by an organization of the city's top

political, corporate, and financial elites called the Commercial Club of Chicago. Incidentally, many of the recommendations in their report were reflected in Re2010's plan, including comments that CPS school reforms have not worked because of constraints of teachers unions and that "the problem is that public education is a 'monopoly'" (Lipman & Haines, p. 481). Furthermore, Ayers and Klonsky (2006) argue that many of the more progressive education reformers who had been doing work in Chicago for many years were left out, and that "many of its strategies for change ran counter to those deeply rooted in the small schools movement, none more so than turning over...the new schools to private ownership" (p. 454).

The CPS' history as a national model for educational policies may be a concern for those that do not favor the direction of increasing privatization in the schools and moving towards expanding charter schools. Since Duncan's new role nationally will be drawing from his previous experiences in Chicago, which Obama supports and favors, it is logical to conclude that the Ren2010 in Chicago may continue to be a pilot for national policies.

### **Closing the "Achievement Gap" – Concerns and Obama's Agenda**

Closing the academic "achievement gap" is now a widely used (and abused) code for describing the disparities in educational performance (namely, test scores) when comparing students of different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds and abilities. Deconstructing the political motivation behind efforts to "close the gap" is challenging because very real inequities and inequalities exist between and among schools and various socio/cultural student populations (Belfanz & Legers, 2004; Kozol, 2005). However, many scholars argue that the educational policies selected and enforced as measures to address gaps in student achievement and educational attainment are problematic in many regards (e.g. Apple, 2006; Hursh, 2007; Kumashiro, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lipman, 2007). One issue raised is that primary methods for measuring the gap – standardized tests – are considered legitimate tools for assessing student learning, while several studies show that testing is actually contributing to creating a wider gap, exacerbating inequalities, and increasing the rate of students dropping out (Hursh, 2007; Lipman, 2007; McNeil, et al, 2008). Furthermore, researchers find the development of standards themselves problematic, especially when they are ethno-centric and biased (Hursh, 2007; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007).

#### *Standardization & Implicit Versus Explicit Curriculum*

One of the most problematic issues concerning standardized curriculum is the illusion that somehow developing standards will make it "neutral," while it is clear that content never is, it always legitimizes the dominant ideologies of those who define it (Apple, 2006; Kumashiro, 2008; Mc Laren, 2003). As previously addressed, the federal government increasingly over the last 30 years has situated the intent of education around global competitiveness and career development (e.g., National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Obama, 2009e). As such, the standardization of content has centered around structures that reinforce behaviors such as obedience, competition, and reinforcement of meritocracy (Kozol, 2005; Lipman, 2007). This is what Goodlad (1984/2005) describes as the *implicit* or "hidden" curriculum, or that which is implied by the method or environment of what is taught.

In addition, the content itself, especially that which is deemed useful for testing, necessitates simplicity in concepts, which are frequently ethno-centric, even though they may be described as “core” or “basic” curriculum. As noted by Spring (2008) the laws mandating standardized tests and state standards were developed in order to “regulate the school curriculum to ensure that a single culture would dominate the school” in spite of previous efforts towards developing multi-cultural and affirming learning environments (p. 489). This is similar to what has taken place throughout history in the re-telling of historical events from the perspective the dominant or imperialist powers (Zinn, 1995).

Ohanian (2008) also exposes the entrenchment of corporate elites and their influence in the development of standards by the Clinton Administration. Prior to the development of NCLB, Clinton (1996) called upon big business leaders to rally support for and “speak out for reform...[and] to be knowledgeable enough to know what reform to speak out for, and what to hammer home in the case for higher standards” (as cited in Ohanian, 2008, p. 156). As Clinton was a strong supporter of “School-to-Work” initiatives, he established a precedent for developing strong public-private partnerships in the development of educational standards and reforms (Ohanian, 2008; Spring, 2008). (To be discussed further below).

One primary issue raised concerning current educational policies under NCLB is the inconsistency in standards established at the state level. Darling-Hammond (2007) argues that NCLB has actually made it harder for states to authentically improve student achievement (or at least accurately compare and measure it against other states) because the accountability measures vary from state to state. Ironically, states that have set the highest standards actually risk having the most schools labeled as “failing” under NCLB (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Researches have found (Hoye & Sturgis, 2005; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vaquez Heilig, 2008) that in an attempt to raise their school test scores, schools are “pushing” students out of school. Darling-Hammond (2007) states that “perhaps the most adverse unintended consequence of NCLB is that it creates incentives for schools to rid themselves of students who are not doing well, producing higher scores at the expense of vulnerable students” (p. 16). In addition, studies have shown that schools hold students back to improve the test scores of certain grade levels or “encourage” students to transfer or drop out in order to avoid counting their test scores (McNeil, et al, 2008; Lipman & Haines, 2007).

These issues have led to increasing debate concerning the development of national standards, which Obama discussed in a speech (Obama, 2009e, ¶ 20) and Duncan has noted he favors (Mora, 2009). Arguments in favor of national standards suggest that inequities among states will be ameliorated and the federal government will have greater control over educational quality. However, critics argue that such a system will only serve to reinforce what, as previously noted, is a flawed system devised to “close the achievement gap” in the first place (e.g. Apple, 1996; Kumashiro, 2008; Morgan & Saxton, 2006). At the same time, national standards will strengthen politicians’ claims that every student has an equal opportunity to succeed and compete in the global market place, since every student, theoretically, will be receiving the same education (Hursh, 2007; Ohanian, 2008).

The implications of policies like these are profound, especially because it will reinforce existing problematic racist and classist attitudes towards students who do not perform well on tests. Furthermore, as previously established, since standards are not neutral, but in fact reflect the ideologies of their creators, nationalizing standards will take us even further away from local control and influence over what is included should they exist at all. In addition, to date, I have not seen any mention by Obama of his intent to support inclusion of greater cultural diversity in shaping standards, though if that were to happen it may help to make the content more inclusive and relevant, but would not change other problematic issues.

Obama supports strong standards, in fact, he and Duncan have both addressed their desire for states that currently have lower standards to raise them higher (e.g. Obama, 2009e). Obama's language concerning raising standards is very reminiscent to *A Nation at Risk* (1983) calling for "tougher, clearer standards" that will ensure that we are not "being outpaced by other nations" (Obama, 2009e, ¶ 19 - 21). These are just a few of the sentiments that demonstrate Obama's alignment with neoliberal ideologies that reinforce the purpose of schooling as preparation for economic competition with other nations. In addition, Obama sees standards as central to that purpose, the crafting and establishing of core curriculum that means "spending less time teaching things that don't matter, and more time teaching things that do" and preparing students "not only for high school or college, but for a career" (Obama, 2009e, ¶ 21). Since the implementation of NCLB, educators have raised concerns about what has already been lost as a result of the reforms. Statements like this further add concern as we wonder what else will be sacrificed in order for students to be more competitive with those in other nations.

Furthermore, Obama declares that not improving our standards and assessments is "a prescription for economic decline" (Obama, 2009e, ¶ 21). This statement, of course, echoes former sentiments blaming schools for the economic failures of the country. At what point will the failures of the economy be blamed on the economic system itself, rather than implying that our schools and students are the guilty party, as though the issue is that we aren't producing enough educated citizens? I am genuinely concerned that the standardization is actually dumbing-down curriculum to rote factoids, devoid of the deep, critical thinking, and engaging learning activities that research supports as the best way for sustained learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Morgan & Saxton, 2006).

Although Obama and Duncan speak to concerns about the narrowing of curriculum as a result of tests (Education Week, 2009a), a comprehensive analysis of the affects of standardization on all aspects of children's educational experiences is absent. Although Obama's goals for educational reform include a desire for schools to be more innovative, and for assessments to test higher-level thinking skills of students, without a deeper analysis of the "hidden curriculum" encompassed within the content and context shaping the education system, schools will maintain their role as centers of ideological management, reinforcing and perpetuating the disparities and inequities of previous generations.

### *Sanctions and Adequate Yearly Progress*

Another concern shared by many is that existing NCLB legislation applies sanctions to schools when they fail to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). NCLB legislates that schools must

demonstrate AYP in students' math and reading scores with a goal of 100 percent proficiency by 2014 in all public schools ("*Stronger accountability...*," 2004). AYP currently is determined by standards established in each state, with resounding concerns as previously noted. Duncan, having experienced the challenges associated with this legislation in his role as superintendent in Chicago, in which his schools failed to meet AYP in 2004-2008, has repeatedly commented that he plans to address some of these issues, namely to establish rewards for schools that make AYP, rather than sanctioning those who do not (e.g., see Blitzer, 2009). Obama has noted this in his education plan as well, highlighting the need for states that are "racing to the bottom" by having lower standards that result in actually higher levels of meeting AYP, to meet the standards of states "racing to the top" to match global competitors (2009e, ¶ 20). This idea is reinforced with Obama's stimulus package in which \$5 billion "Race to the Top" grants will be awarded to those states that have made significant improvement in the top four reform goals, including: 1) developing college- and career-readiness standards and high quality assessments; 2) developing college and career data systems; 3) improving teacher effectiveness and quality for all students; and 4) supporting and implementing effective interventions in lowest performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b).

Among the primary criticisms of the school accountability measures, is that when labeled as "failing" for not meeting AYP, a punitive process is set into motion moving towards school closure and take-over (often by private-managed charter companies) and "reconstitution" (or the firing and replacement of teachers and other school staff), rather than assistance and support (Ayers & Klonsky, 2006; Lipman & Haines, 2007). As is often the case, these schools face "losing students to competing schools, having students tutored by for-profit and faith-based corporations, and ultimately reopening as a charter school" (Hursh, 2007, p. 16). When this happens, a chain of events occur in which some of the higher performing students within these "failing" schools transfer out to "better" schools, leaving the former school with a disproportionate number of students that are struggling, while the later schools' "inherit" the highest achievers (Hill, 2008). This system clearly perpetuates the disenfranchisement of students who do not have the resources or means to "choose" any school they wish, while at the same time punishing schools through sanctions when what they need is more support.

The accountability system that Chicago Public Schools developed is similar to the goals and intentions that Obama and Duncan continue to champion (e.g. Obama, 2009e; Duncan, 2009). As argued by Lipman and Haines (2007) "CPS responded with an accountability system that institutionalized a simplistic, one-size-fits-all practice of demarcating students, teachers, and schools into those deemed 'failing' or 'successful' and then meted out penalties without regard for inequities in resources, opportunities to learn, teacher's ideologies, cultural disconnections in curriculum and instruction, social contexts of the school, or strengths children bring to the school setting" (p. 479). As a result, regular public schools have been closed down, reconstituted, and new schools opened, a vast majority of which are charters that are freed from many of the statutory regulations applied to former schools (Lipman & Haines, 2007). The CPS example demonstrates how the accountability system easily sets schools up for failure and legalizes the gentrification of schools within communities, at the loss of neighborhood communities and the gain of private investors and interests (Klein, N., 2007; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Schmidt, 2008).

Furthermore, Kumashiro (2008) reveals that the differences in policies between the high stakes accountability systems of regular public schools and the regulatory freedoms granted to charter schools “raises questions over whether such regulations were meant to improve public schools (since they are being made optional for charter schools) or to encourage the creation of alternatives to public education” (p. 30). It is difficult to get beyond the irony (or absurdity) that on one hand, existing legislation establishes strict enforcement of standardization and high-stakes testing in regular public schools, while at the same time, charter schools are often “released” from many of the same regulations in order to allow “innovation”. Lipman and Haines (2007) raise similar issues stating that “NCLB paves the way for privatization” and that charter schools allow “new private managers the freedom they desire to be freed from teachers’ union contracts” (p. 481). Clearly, those interested in investing in schools (for economic reasons) benefit from this system of accountability as it establishes a system in which struggling schools are almost guaranteed failure if they are sanctioned and forced to close if they are unable to meet AYP. Using CPS as an example, in such a system, the interested parties may form their own governing body, establish their own measures of assessment and accountability, and be released from many other regulatory mechanisms including circumventing teacher union contracts (Lipman & Haynes, 2007). We can see that this mirrors the free market system in which schools compete to exist, and private interests are more or less unhindered by government regulations.

These topics are complex because they are in many ways interrelated. For example, those who favor teacher salary based on merit (or “alternative compensation”) argue that it is time we reward good teachers (Obama, 2009e), which some support. However, when rewards are tied to an accountability system in which teacher performance and “quality” is judged by student results on standardized tests, a cascade of consequences follow, including narrowing curriculum and teaching to the test and “pushing out” students who are not doing well in order to raise overall scores (Darling-Hammond, 2007; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vaquez Heilig, 2008).

As previously noted, the Obama Administration has proposed and is now putting into place a variety of changes to alter the current accountability system. For example, the current funding proposed for the development of new charter schools includes increasing “state oversight to monitor and shut down low-performing charter schools” (U.S. Department of Management & Budget, 2009). It is unclear, however, whether this means that charter schools will be held to the same accountability measures as regular public schools. Regardless, given the track record of most schools across the country not able to meet AYP, even with revised measures, it can be safely expected that the movement to shut down schools will continue and the increased funding for charters will advance their proliferation.

While Obama and Duncan have stated that they want to change accountability measures to reward innovation and support those schools that are struggling, rather than punish them, critics may argue that the system itself is so rife with flaws in fundamental ways, these legislative changes, though an improvement, will not address many of the complex problems.

### *High-Stakes Testing*

Although assessing students using standardized tests is not a new phenomenon, NCLB introduced the use of high stakes testing and accountability, as the primary method of measuring

and assessing the race/class “gap” in performance indicators and increased the amount of times students have to be tested (Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007). Although many have found value in, and some even praise, NCLB for raising national consciousness concerning the disparities in educational attainment and achievement of students, critics argue that the methods used to “close” the achievement gap are problematic and have actually resulted in *increasing* gaps and have been used as a distraction for other inequities (Kumashiro, 2008; McNeil, et al, 2008).

For example, many scholars claim that disaggregating test scores by race, though intended to address educational inequities resulting from racism, has actually led to increased and intensified racism from teachers and parents (Hursh, 2007; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman, 2007). Furthermore, Kumashiro argues that “closing the gap” implies that students below the gap are not measuring up to what others passing the gap are “supposed” to learn (p. 75). He goes on to say that “raising the achievement of historically marginalized students in the current education system is counterproductive if what is taught is biased to begin with” (p. 76). The country was built on a historical legacy of racism that still exists today, even though its forms and functions are different. Racist attitudes cannot be erased by simply enforcing standardization and examining discrepancies in test results, rather, we must engage in reflective interaction to confront our biases and attitudes (hooks, 1994; Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999).

Many researchers have found that standardization of education is not solving issues of inequity, nor raising teacher expectations of students whom they view are deficient or low-performing (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Kozol, 2005). For example, McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) draw an important connection between the expectations of students and their performance. As part of a discussion regarding changing the destructive patterns of negative attitudes of teachers on behalf of their students, they state:

For example, if we hold the dysconscious perception that some children are at a deficit because of race, poverty, culture, behavior, home language, and so forth and, therefore, are incapable of performing at high levels, we lower our expectations for them. This lowering of expectations affects how we treat the students, and it communicates these lowered expectations to them with the frequent result that the students come to see themselves as being less intelligent or as incapable of doing well in school...Then, as more and more teachers and administrators treat these children in this way, these children, *who must find some way to protect themselves or support a positive idea of themselves*, drop out, whether in school or not...[and] reinforce this negative, downward cycle. (pp. 603-604, emphasis added)

We can see that standardizing the curriculum can also foster negative/deficit attitudes of educators toward marginalized youth since the curriculum fails to meet their academic needs. Racist/classist attitudes are not challenged or adequately addressed by education reforms that use standardization as the primary method of addressing inequality.

Another example of the negative impacts of high stakes standardized testing are found in a longitudinal study of the school reform initiative in Texas, in which McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, and Vaquez Heilig (2008) found clear evidence that the achievement gap was widening for African-American and Latino students, and schools were “pushing” out students in order to

improve test scores. They found that African-American and Latino students had a 70% dropout rate, which was misrepresented in public school records stating much lower rates, as a result of their liberal use of describing student “transitions” and lack of consistent and confirmable data tracking. This study is particularly notable because, like initiatives in CPS, the Texas school reforms efforts were used as a model for NCLB, with the former Texas Superintendent of Schools, Rod Paige, moving into position as Secretary of Education under President Bush. Furthermore, researchers have found that the intensive focus on improving test scores rather than improving instructional methodologies has led to piecemeal and disconnected reforms (Cooper & Jordan, 2003). To emphasize this point, Kozol (2005) found that within many of the schools he researched (predominantly inner city, segregated, low-performing schools) standardized education is delivered using “protomilitary” forms of discipline. This instructional methodology utilizes behavioral control methods traditionally used in prisons, and which are now applied to educating of youth of color. Additionally, Kozol argues that the nation’s high stakes testing required under NCLB has taken “pathological and punitive dimensions” in which education in inner-city schools has increasingly been replaced with robotic methods of instruction (Kozol, 2005, abstract).

Extreme examples of this (which are nonetheless quite widespread) is the practice in some schools who have adopted curriculum that requires teachers to use scripted lesson plans and manages all aspects of their classroom, including what student work is permitted to be posted on classroom walls, the precise day and time that particular content be delivered and activities to be practiced, and specific hand signals and other forms of body language to be taught and used to communicate with students (Kozol, 2005). Furthermore, “curriculum police” drop by the school unannounced, visit classrooms, and observe what teachers and doing, what their classrooms look like and assess how closely they are following the scripted curriculum, holding teachers accountable to these practices (Kozol, 2005). A truly standardized and systematic approach to schooling creates practices such as these, which is why so many are against them. These practices follow very regimented forms of “factory-model” schooling in which the emphasis is on efficiency, obedience, and competition, all skills required within a capitalist workplace (Spring, 2008).

Another example of the direction that holding teachers and schools accountable for their students’ performance on tests can go to extremes is the recent beating of teachers in Tanzania for students not passing their exams (BBC News, 2009). Although this kind of abuse is not permitted in this country, the example sheds light on the lengths that some go to reinforce and ensure particular knowledge is distributed to students.

Though debate continues concerning the usefulness of educational standards and the subsequent use of standardized tests, one thing is for certain, the testing system is expensive for schools, and of course, profitable for the companies that develop them. According to the U.S. General Accounting office “states will spend between \$1.9 and \$5.3 billion to develop tests, then score, and prepare reports of test results” (Mathison, 2008, p. 166). Obviously, the institutionalization of testing has invited increased involvement of private companies into schools, where they develop test-taking technologies, create test preparation materials, score tests and report results, provide tutoring services, and sell services that promise to increase test scores (Mathison, 2008; Kumashiro, 2008). The invitation and involvement of private companies in the public system is

encouraged in a market-driven economy, where businesses, rather than educators, develop the educational material that is the focus in the classroom. Teachers, bound by school, district, state, and federal regulations, have no choice but to follow the prescribed content and have very little flexibility with individualizing their content.

Although Obama and his administration suggest some adjustments and changes to the testing and accountability policies under NCLB, without fundamental changes to the use of standardized tests to drive learning in the classroom, it is unlikely that we will see dramatic shifts in student engagement in school and performance as currently measured. Furthermore, lacking deeper conversations concerning institutionalized racism and the consequences of endemic poverty, it is doubtful that merely examining difference in achievement tests disaggregated by race and income level will lead to real shifts in racist attitudes and discrimination.

Obama and his administration note that they support overall goals of NCLB – namely to close the achievement gap – and support the basic methodology of systematic measurement and assessment, in particular, the use of standardized tests. However, they have not been shy to say they have found many flaws in the law and its particular application (Education Week, 2009b; Obama & Biden, n.d.). Tests, they say, need improvement, so that they assess higher order, critical thinking skills through performance-based assessments that also measure workplace and college readiness (Obama & Biden, n.d., ¶ 5). Duncan has commented that he understands the flaws of NCLB having experienced it and he and Obama have stated repeatedly that they do not feel that teachers should waste their time preparing students for tests, but rather should spend more time on comprehensive and authentic instruction (Education Week, 2009b; Mora, 2009).

However, even though Obama and his administration are advocating for better quality assessments, there is still an emphasis on what Schneider and Keesler (2007) surfaced as one of the fundamental problems of NCLB - the emphasis on “incentives for outputs (student achievement) rather than inputs” (p. 208). For example, critical educators and researchers have found value in supporting learning environments that include project- and inquiry-based experiences, finding and making meaningful connections to the work, including culturally relevant content and including students’ personal stories, and actively participating and creating within the learning environment, to name a few (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Gutek, 2004; hooks, 1999). Given the widespread concern shared by researchers and educators concerning the costs of the focus on “outputs,” as well as Obama’s own acknowledgement that focus on testing has narrowed public school pedagogy, some might question the extent to which these alternative forms of assessment are going to improve student experiences in the classroom and their learning overall. Although Obama makes comments that suggest he understands the need to focus on “inputs,” overwhelmingly his focus is on outcomes and future opportunities, especially those related to college and careers in the global economy.

Obama has acknowledged problems with the current reforms arising from narrowing curriculum in order to teach to-the-test, sanctions that have hurt schools rather than helped them, and problems resulting from under-funding NCLB (Obama, 2006 & 2009e; Obama & Biden, n.d.). He has committed to change policies in current legislation that facilitates repairing these unintended consequences that have accompanied previous reforms. For example, proposals to change the accountability systems to be supportive of schools that face challenges, rather than

punishing them through sanctions, will be welcomed by many (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Likewise he has already followed-through with his commitment to increase funding in education, infusing state and federal education systems with more funding than has been seen in recent past (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). However, as noted above, this funding still is not enough.

### *Educational Debt – Not an Achievement Gap*

Ladson-Billings (2006 & 2008) suggests that one of the primary problems with focusing on an “achievement gap” of students is that it fails to address the reality of what she argues we are seeing is instead an “educational debt.” She states:

When we think of what we are combating as the achievement gap, we implicitly place the onus for closing that gap on the students, their families, and their individual teachers and schools. But the notion of education debt requires us to think about how all of us, as members of a democratic society, are implicated in creating these achievement disparities (p. 236).

One example she provides is in comparing the historical inequities in funding streams allocated to different schools, which she argues helped to create the educational debt. Citing figures from Kozol (2005) a disparate pattern emerges between well-funded and poorly funded schools, much like the differences in income between the wealthiest 1% of the population and everyone else. She states:

Chicago Public Schools spend about \$8,482 per pupil, while nearby Highland Park spends \$17,291 per pupil. Chicago Public Schools have an 87% Black and Latino population, whereas Highland Park has a 90% White population. Per pupil expenditures in Philadelphia are \$9,299 per pupil for its 79% Black and Latino population, whereas across City Link Avenue in Lower Merion the per-pupil expenditure is \$17,261 for a 91% White population. (p. 237)

Lipman and Haines (2007) comment on issues involving schools in impoverished communities, where many Black and Latino students live, stating that “the ‘failure’ [of these schools] cannot be disentangled from the lack of resources, staff instability, and revolving door of top-down programs or from the instability and economic disenfranchisement of families in the community” (p. 480). Other scholars making similar claims, point to the flaws in focusing on raising achievement of students in “failing schools” – placing accountability and blame solely on the shoulders of students, teacher and schools – instead of addressing the real enduring issue of chronic poverty, strained infrastructures, and educational debt (Campaign for High School Equity, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Kumashiro, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006 & 2008).

Amidst criticism from conservative politicians who continue to advocate for cuts to social programs (for example see Associated Press, 2009) Obama has boldly set forth both an economic stimulus package and a federal budget that include significant increases in government investment in education and social services (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 2009). This demonstrates Obama's commitment and understanding of issues concerning the educational debt faced by schools across the country, even during one of the most economically depressed eras in

the nation's history (Obama, 2009e). However, as noted by Ladson-Billings (2006), the debt has been accumulating for centuries and effective solutions will require community-wide investments and long-term changes in ways that the government manages the economy.

### **College and Career Development**

Allocations within the current stimulus package support goals focused on improving tests and assessments and reinforce Obama's support for educational emphasis on college and career preparation, as evidenced in the four key areas outlined in the school reform goals previously noted (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b). Current funding requires states to demonstrate that they are "making progress toward rigorous college- and career-ready standards and high-quality assessments that are valid and reliable for all students, including English language learners and students with disabilities" (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b, ¶ 5-6). Including these specifications for receiving funding under NCLB clarifies their intent to improve assessments for multiple users and to better serve post-secondary functions as well.

Since access to college disproportionately favors White, Asian, and affluent youth, Obama's funding to support college loans is positive. However, as noted previously, those critical of the capitalist economy question the legitimacy of and actual need for this "highly educated and skilled workforce" (Obama, 2008b) Given that the largest growth sector is in the service industry, and with a free-market economy that encourages global competition to drive down wages, many youth question today whether there will be jobs for them in the future.

Despite this, Obama, like his predecessor Clinton, has been very articulate about his support for career development, especially through college education (Obama, 2009d). It is important to note that there are a number of organizations that support and encourage career development in schools – especially youth development focused non-profits (e.g. Hoachlaender, 2008; New Ways to Work, 2007; Seltzer, 2007). Advocates for career development see it as a strategy for contextualizing academics and making it "relevant," helping disenfranchised populations start working early so they can attain better careers later on, and as a dropout prevention strategy. However, history has shown that career development in schools has functioned to track students into pathways that are either vocational or academic, frequently establishing barriers early on for students to be able to access higher education (Hoachlaender, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Kozol (2005) documents extremely problematic examples of taking work-based learning and career development into the classroom. For example, some schools appropriate and institutionalize business titles and roles, calling school principals "CEOs," classroom teachers "managers," and students "employees." In addition, many aspects of school are conducted in pseudo-business manners; students complete "applications" and "interview" with the principal for school "jobs" such as "hall monitor manager". Furthermore, a business-like atmosphere aligns very well to educational reforms focused on efficiency, and reinforces practices that are replicable (standardization) and assessment that is streamlined (testing).

Less extreme examples include career-focused academies and "career pathways" that tie student academic learning to career-related themes. While there are many ways to assess the influence of maintaining a career-focused atmosphere within schools, what is relevant to this conversation

goes back to questioning how the beliefs, structures, and practices serve to reinforce neoliberal ideologies. Clearly, supporting an educational environment that reinforces competition, obedience, and pro-capitalist attitudes entirely serve neoliberal ideologies. In contrast to schools that nurture creativity, critical thinking, questioning, and playing, those that have a strong career-focused intention point students towards a particular and dominant future direction, even though work is only one (though important) aspect of our lives. Many argue that this focus is positive and needed, especially for those that are disenfranchised, and has proven successful in helping these students go on to higher education (Hoachlaender, 2008; *New Ways to Work*, 2007; Oakes & Saunders, 2007; Wald & Martinez, 2003).

Another concern to critical educators is the role that private enterprise often plays in establishing career academies and vocational programs within schools. Very often local businesses through public/private partnerships will become involved in designing courses, teaching lessons, and supporting internships. Obama supports these kinds of partnerships in schools and values the “expertise” that professionals in the private sector can bring to students. This is demonstrated in his proposals to recruit new teachers from the pool of experienced professionals in business, especially math and science (Education Week, 2009; Obama, 2009d & 2009e). However, those concerned about the influence and rapid encroachment of private interests in schools are leery of their increasing involvement. However, as previously noted, these intentions often fail to question the economic system itself.

Educators must question the “hidden curriculum” being taught to students in these environments and examine which schools are transformed to serve vocational pursuits and populations they serve. Historically, students of color have been tracked in vocational training programs, which remains to be the case today (Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Spring, 2008; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). However, current efforts are underway to develop “multi-pathways” that blend career-related instruction with college-preparation course work, with the intention of serving all public school students (e.g. Hoachlaender, 2008; Oakes & Saunders, 2007).

### **Expanding “Choice” through Charter Schools**

A favored solution by Obama and Duncan for improving schools is to open “innovative” and successful charter schools, as was demonstrated by their work together and separately in Chicago. As such, it was not surprising that their first visit to a public school after Obama took office as President was to a charter school in Washington D.C. (Expeditionary Learning Services, 2009). Obama has promised to double funding for the expansion of “successful” charter schools that have met stronger accountability measures (Obama & Biden, n.d.). His recent budget proposal reflects this commitment in which he calls upon states to “reform their charter rules” (2009e, p. 30).

Charter school development is an educational policy and reform issue that is greatly debated. One of the reasons for this is that the independent and autonomous nature of charter schools lends itself to charters being developed by different constituencies for different reasons (Ayers & Klonsky, 2006; Kumashiro, 2008). Most developers favor charters because they loosen traditional restrictions and regulations applied to regular public schools, allowing for diverse forms of ingenuity, including theme-focused schools, small schools, and schools featuring

particular pedagogical approaches. In addition, states often allow charters to be released from teacher-union restrictions, which benefits administrators who have more control over hiring and firing, can support greater flexibility in school scheduling, and may include options for merit-based increases. Furthermore, as is the case in Chicago, charter schools are often overseen by independent advisory boards, replacing traditionally elected public servants. Studies have shown that these “autonomies” have led to increased privatization of schools, often staffed with less experienced teachers, working longer hours and more days for less pay, as is the case of a majority of the charter schools developed under Ren2010 in Chicago (Brown & Gutstein, 2009; Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman & Haines, 2007).

Historically, founders of charters have been community-based and frequently involve a variety of stakeholders including parents, teachers, local businesses and industries, and local school districts. However, nowadays, many charters are “run by for-profit companies, forming a key component of the privatization movement in education” (Education Week, 2009b, p. 55). Despite this, many people still associate charters with grass roots, community development, rather than the prevailing direction charters are moving in towards increased privatization. This may be due in part to what Ayers and Klonsky (2006) describe as the complexity of avenues under “school choice,” which can mean “both a widening of options for the city’s underserved students and a replication of our traditional, two-tiered education system” (p. 454).

Some studies have shown that some charter schools have made incredible gains in supporting students that were not remaining engaged in traditional public schools or were not succeeding academically, especially among low-income, students of color (e.g., Friedlaender & Darling-Hammond, 2007). However, others argue this may be the result of size (generally small), not necessarily because of their charter status (Ayers & Klonsky, 2006; Education Week, 2009b). Overall research concerning the success of charter schools is inconclusive, or shows very little difference from regular public schools (Education Week, 2009b; Lipman & Haines, 2007). Furthermore, much of the charter schools research has been conducted by the same corporate foundations that fund them, leading to a clear conflict of interest (Kumashiro, 2008; Lipman & Haines, 2007).

In many ways, the development and growth of charter schools is a quintessential example of neoliberalism in education. Charter schools capitalize on the idea of developing a competitive market in education, whereby schools are released of regulatory restrictions and may freely develop and compete with each other and public schools. Apple (2006) claims that proponents believe that “only by forcing schools onto a competitive market will there be any improvement” (p.2). This idea proved true in statements made by the corporate stakeholders involved in Ren2010 (Lipman & Haines, 2007). Through the involvement and often times, management of charters by private companies, charter schools become a private enterprise paid for with public dollars. Within this system of freedom is a dynamic in which regular public schools continue to shoulder the responsibility of serving many of the students who have the most needs, while the charter system of choice is taken advantage of by those parents who have the resources and wherewithal to ensure that their children attend particular schools. As described by Hill (2008) “Where there is a market in schools...the result is increasing raced and gendered social class differentiation. The middle class (predominantly White) rapidly colonize the best schools; the working classes (White and Black) get pushed out...High status/high achieving middle-class

schools get better and better results... 'sink' [or low-performing] schools sink further, denuded of their brightest intakes" (p. xix).

Several researchers have found this to be the case in Chicago Public Schools through the Ren2010 initiative (Brown & Gustein, 2009; Lipman, 2007). Schmidt (2008) argues that the success of Ren2010 is not the "urban inner city" reform it is touted to be. He claims that the geographic areas where charter schools are demonstrating their "outstanding success" are in highly affluent, predominantly White neighborhoods far from the poverty and multi-culturalism usually associated with "inner city" communities. He further notes the heavy influence of corporate interests in leading and financing the charter school development in Chicago, none of which has gone to support the improvement of regular public schools (p. 260-261).

Obama's support for charter school expansion is clear through his words and actions through funding. Furthermore, there was likely no better candidate than Duncan to model the ways the current education system could function with reforms that provided extensive supports and freedoms for charter schools. In addition, as in Chicago, charter schools are providing new models for public-private partnerships and reflect Obama's leadership style that is sympathetic to business interests.

In summary, charter schools currently serve as the "final act" in the cycle of public schools failing under federally regulated accountability-measures. When this happens, a predictable sequence of events take place, including: sanctions applied to schools for poor-performance on standardized tests, leading to increased involvement of private companies who provide test preparation and tutoring services for those students who do not "choose" to go to a "higher quality" schools (usually White students or those more economically-privileged). Many of those students who stay (usually disenfranchised populations) are frequently forced to experience greater narrowing of curriculum and teachers expected to teach to the test. In these environments, students often drop out or are "pushed out" by administrators. Finally, when these and other "reforms" continue to miss the mark, the schools are closed and, frequently, re-opened as new, privately-managed charter schools. This series of events and this final act is the closest our nation has come in privatizing public education and supporting neoliberal interests through enabling market-based competition and inviting private corporations and businesses to engage directly in the structure, functioning, curriculum, and management of schools.

#### **IV: Significance**

Analyzing the educational policies of the new administration under the leadership of President Barack Obama, though a relevant topic for all citizens, is particularly important for students, parents, educators, and administrators whose lives are directly affected by school system reforms. Critical educators and those concerned with the global economic system influenced by neoliberal ideologies and practices will likely find this analysis useful in examining President Obama's educational agenda to further research as he continues in this role.

By critically examining Obama's educational policies we can be more informed and engaged citizens, hopefully leading to advocacy efforts and the mobilization of citizens to actively participate in shaping our democracy. Given the opportunity, it is important that we make our

voices heard and question the decisions and policies of the President, because it is *our* government.

### **V: Limitations**

As this research was conducted during President Obama's first two months in office, much of his education agenda remains in stated promises and beliefs. As his time in office continues, there is a need to critically examine his actual educational policies and the results. Of critical importance will be changes to federal legislation, in particular those under *No Child Left Behind*. It is important that researchers analyze the affect of capitalism and neoliberalism on U.S. educational policies because the connections drawn between global economics and the education system has been a central focus of each President since the 1980s.

### **V: Conclusions**

As we approach the end of the first decade in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the social, economic, and environmental issues we face are profoundly more complex and challenging than in any prior generation (Brown, 2008; Castells, 1997/2004; Klein N., 2007). Those critical of the capitalist economic system, in particular the ways in which it has, and is, forging a market where competing nations "free-up" their economic policies and markets, and deregulate and loosen restrictions on labor and human rights, are very concerned about the resounding impact on the United States. Furthermore, since the function of public education within this country has long been tied to its economic goals, schools today remain a central focus of "system reforms" aiming to make students more competitive in the global marketplace.

The election of Barack Obama as the nation's first African American president is an obvious civil rights victory that a majority of people in this nation are proud of. However, in spite of the inspiration President Obama invoked, and the hope he continues to enshrine, it is evident that his political ideologies do not stray far from his predecessors. I have examined the historical influence of global neoliberal economic policies on the U.S. education system, finding much resonance with the contemporary policies and agenda Obama has set forth.

As is demonstrated, Obama supports many quintessential American beliefs that have historically led to disparities in social and economic status – namely, capitalism and meritocracy. In previous generations, schools have served to inculcate youth to these dominant ideologies, which Obama, so far, appears will sustain through his educational policies. Furthermore, despite the hope of many progressive and critical educators that Obama would help resolve and end many of the issues that have arisen out of federal educational policies under *No Child Left Behind*, Obama's proposed changes are moderate. The next iteration of national educational legislation will have improvements that many will agree with, such as removing punitive policies that punish "low-performing" schools, while other proposals will likely extend and enhance the involvement of private enterprise in public schools, such as doubling funding for charter schools.

Overall, I have argued that we are about to see an education system that does not look much different from that initiated by Obama's predecessors. Already, Obama's rhetoric resonates with the ideology and claims laid out in *A Nation at Risk* (1983). However, despite my critique, there

is a spirit to Obama that took hold in me that is carrying through a conviction that we must hold him to his word to call on us to actively participate in our government, and follow-through with holding him accountable in his role as our nation's leader.

There is a body of research documenting the work of individual schools and local communities working together to address the real inequities experienced by students in schools as a result of the economic and social injustice in this country (e.g. Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools, n.d.; Campaign for High School Equity, 2007; Coalition of Essential Schools, 2006; Diploma Plus, n.d.; Rethinking Schools, n.d.; Teachers 4 Social Justice, n.d. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (Fair Test), n.d.). An opportunity has presented itself under Obama's leadership to share our vision of schools and to vote for those reforms that will make a difference. Those of us concerned about the future of education, and more importantly, the future of this planet, must express our desire for a purpose of education that goes beyond global economic competition. We must envision an education system that affords students the opportunity to grapple with the complex social, ecological, and economic issues we are facing as humans on this planet in comprehensive and creative ways that go far beyond tests. This will take a significant investment in our schools, beyond what has been done by any previous administration. It will also mean moving away from the privatization of schools, which like other public services run by corporations, has led to market-driven ideologies and practices that dominates the purpose and functions of these organizations.

What is also needed are federal and state policies that actually support the needs and interests of students, rather than those that perpetuate inequality and favor private interests. The time is right for proposing recommendations for changes to the current legislation, however, I suggest that critical educators and researchers take a more forward step and construct an entirely new piece of legislation to guide our federal policies.

Furthermore, there is much that we can learn from the environmental movement – think globally, but act locally. We must become active in our local communities, flood the local school board with our ideas, write letters to the superintendent, and hold town meetings with concerned parents, educators, and students. Many of us must learn how to be active citizens, figure out how to be part of the political process instead of watching things happen around us. As Kumashiro (2008) suggests, we must “reframe the debate” around school reform and reject those ideologies that we know are reinforcing inequity in this country. I am just learning and un-learning much of the information presented in this paper, and am myself guilty of deep thought without action. However, as Freire (1970) told us, true liberation can only come about through serious reflection and organized struggle. This, I believe, is the most important next step we can make.

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**Appendix A: Key Elements of Obama’s Education Agenda and a Critical Theorist Critique**

<b>Education Agenda &amp; Goals</b>	<b>Critical Theorist/Neoliberal Critique</b>
<p><b>Reform No Child Left Behind:</b>                      1) fully fund the law; 2) develop national standards to replace state-determined standards; 3) fund states to develop improved, performance-based assessments that track student progress and measure college and work readiness; 4) improve the accountability system so that it supportive rather than punitive; and 5) change the name of the law (Education Week, 2009b; Obama, 2006; Obama &amp; Biden, n.d.; Ramirez &amp; Clark, 2009).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Maintains system of standardization that perpetuates and reinforces inequity, narrows curriculum, and is culturally-biased</li> <li>- High-stakes testing legitimizes neoliberal ideologies such as competition, meritocracy, Social-Darwinism and leads to “pushing” students out in order to raise test scores</li> <li>- Accountability system unfairly places blame on students, teachers, and schools, failing to hold entire system accountable</li> <li>- Private companies develop and profit from standardized curriculum, tests, and tutoring programs</li> </ul>
<p><b>Support Charter School Expansion &amp; Innovative Programs:</b>                      1) Double funding for charter schools in an effort to expand parent choice and school innovation, 2) tie funding to parameters around increasing accountability for successful performance; 3) Support states and individual districts with creating a “portfolio” of successful public schools, including: charters, nonprofit schools, and theme-focused schools (Education Week, 2009b; Obama &amp; Biden, n.d.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Charter schools invite competition and deregulation to the public school system</li> <li>- Charter schools are often developed and managed by private, for-profit companies</li> <li>- Charter schools frequently serve students who come from more privileged backgrounds and do not often serve students with disabilities and second language learners</li> <li>- There is very little difference in performance on standardized tests between students who attend charters and regular public schools</li> <li>- Charter school often hire less experienced teachers, are paid less and work longer hours</li> <li>- Often the “autonomy” afforded to charter schools includes loosening regulations and hiring non-union teachers</li> </ul>
<p><b>Career and College Preparation:</b>                      1) Make math and science instruction at all grade levels a national priority; 2) fund states to develop improved, performance-based assessments; 3) recruit professionals with math and science degrees to both teach in schools and advise other teachers (Obama &amp; Biden, n.d.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Over-emphasis on academics at the expense of other life skills perpetuates school climate issues</li> <li>- Private investors interested in career development are operating within a neoliberal system that itself reproduces economic stratification</li> </ul>

Education Agenda & Goals	Critical Theorist/Neoliberal Critique
<p><b>Support Student Completion of School:</b>                      1) Pass legislation that will provide funding to school districts to invest in middle school intervention strategies in order to address the national dropout crisis (Obama &amp; Biden, n.d).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Many students are dropping out because of the high-stakes accountability system, and school cultures and climates that are unsafe and do not support their personal development</li> <li>- Schools with the highest number of dropouts are most often located within communities that are predominantly low-income and that serve youth of color, primarily Black and Latino youth</li> </ul>
<p><b>Support College Matriculation &amp; Retention:</b>                      1) Launch a national initiative that will increase students taking AP or college-level classes by 50% by 2016; 2) provide grants for students seek college level credit at community colleges; 3) support existing outreach programs that encourage more students from low-income families to attend college; Create a tax credit that will take the first \$4,000 off college education fees for almost all students, and will cover 2/3 of the cost for most students in exchange for community service (Obama, 2009b; Obama &amp; Biden, n.d.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Though jobs that require a college education are increasing, the highest number of available jobs continue to exist in the service sector</li> <li>- The surplus of over-educated workers drives down salaries at the benefit of employers</li> </ul>
<p><b>Teacher Recruitment, Preparation, Retention, and Rewards:</b>                      1) Create new teacher service scholarships in order to recruit higher numbers of teachers within the profession; 2) require schools of education to be accredited, develop a voluntary national performance assessment, and support teacher-residency programs in high-need schools; 3) expand teacher mentoring programs and provide additional funding for teacher collaboration; 4) develop merit-based rewards and salary increases (Obama &amp; Biden, n.d.).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Many of the teacher mentoring programs currently operating are run by private, for-profit companies and legitimize particular ideologies that support neoliberalism and conservatism</li> <li>- Changes in teacher training and credentialing, especially those that require less study and skill development, may lead to further disconnect from alternative forms of curriculum and instruction</li> <li>- Merit-based rewards and salary increases reinforces capitalist concepts of competition</li> <li>- If the merit-system does not take into account the ability level of students and other factors, then teachers with students from more privileged backgrounds may earn rewards, while those serving students with the greatest needs do not.</li> <li>- When merit-based system is based on flawed accountability measures linked to student test scores, fraud and manipulation is likely</li> </ul>