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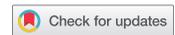
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Parental action and neoliberal education reform: Crafting a research agenda

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberal reforms of public education have promoted a role for parents as individual consumers trying to maximize gains for their own children by choosing from a marketplace of schools. A diverse range of scholarship has explored how parents react to this imposed role, challenging neoliberal conceptions of parental choice by revealing the many factors that shape the enrollment decisions parents make and highlighting the ways that existing inequalities are reproduced through systems of market-driven and unregulated “choice.” A separate emerging literature has examined an alternative role for parents under neoliberal regimes—as collective democratic participants in pursuit of more equitable conceptions of public education and largely in opposition to neoliberal education policies. In this paper, we review the academic literature examining these two visions of parental action under neoliberalism, identify limitations in the literature on collective parental action in opposition to neoliberal reforms, and outline a set of research questions for scholars to address to help enhance our understanding of this important domain.

Big Question on New York State Tests: How Many Will Opt Out? (Harris & Taylor, 2016)

Public Frustration Boils Over at Meeting on School Closures (Jewson, 2018)

NAACP, Parents and Activists in Harlem at Odds over Charter Schools (Snow, 2011)

Headlines like these punctuate national news, as decades of neoliberal “reforms” of public education have sought to rewrite parents’ positions vis-à-vis schools. In this context, parents across class, race, and geography have adopted varied roles, individually and collectively: as consumers in the educational “market,” as engaged parents in the schools, and as educational activists in local, state, and national campaigns—cultivating a quite vibrant but sometimes confusing theater of parental power.

In this paper, we review the academic literature examining parental action under neoliberal education regimes, highlighting two contrasting streams—evaluations of the ways parents enact individualistic consumer choice versus accounts of parents acting collectively, largely in opposition to neoliberal education policies. We identify holes in the literature on collective parental action and outline a set of research questions for scholars to address, particularly to enhance our understanding of more recent parental activism.

Neoliberalism is a theory of political and economic practices that “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). In this context, the state’s role is relegated to supporting that institutional framework by limiting or precluding regulations and helping to create markets where they do not already exist, for example “in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Neoliberalism expressly rejects a role for the state as

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a guardian of equity and the public interest, as such “collectivist solutions to social problems” threaten individual liberty (MacLean, 2017, p. 46).

In the neoliberal context, individuals are conceived of as “autonomous entrepreneur[s] who can always take care of [their] own needs” by making “individual choice[s] within markets” (Hursh, 2007, p. 496). In the realm of education, this translates into policies that advance markets, privatization, and competition through the mechanisms of parental school choice: the individualized decisions parents make regarding the schools in which they will enroll their children. The market pressure of such parental choice is theorized to exert a motivating discipline that improves all schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1955).

Neoliberal choice-based policies include a variety of publicly-funded alternatives to traditional local public school enrollments, including charter schools, school vouchers, cyber-charters, magnet schools and both inter and intra-district choice initiatives (Teske & Schneider, 2001). Neoliberal education reformers promote these structurally diverse strategies in ways that preference markets and advance the values of individual benefits, efficiency, competition, accountability, and performance, with an eye toward weakening the power of teacher unions, tenure provisions and collective bargaining (Hursh, 2007). In this way, the neoliberal application of school “choice” differs from earlier efforts to use school choice to advance racial integration and/or to promote educational equity through controlled choice and specialized schools within the public landscape, including some magnet programs, county-wide vocational schools, and alternative schools.

It is important to acknowledge that, while neoliberal education reforms that emphasize market discipline and individual choice have emerged in the past few decades, those with the means to do so have for generations had “choices” to opt out of public schools, particularly but not only from underfunded, poorly performing, and/or racially diversifying public schools. Home schooling, private schools, and exclusively expensive real estate represent long-standing “choice” strategies pursued by higher-income families (Billingham, 2014; Holme, 2002).

Nevertheless, “choice” in the neoliberal context is different in important ways that accentuate the vulnerabilities of lower income families and communities of color. In its conceptual framing, neoliberal policy characterizes markets as “free”—as disconnected from the discriminatory housing policies and practices that have driven racialized segregation in U.S. metro areas for many decades. In fact, proponents of neoliberal choice tout the ways that school “choice” liberates students from the poorly performing schools in their neighborhoods. While this has been true for some families, this framing masks the systemic ways that “choice” policies privilege those already positioned to take advantage of the market and disadvantage those unable to do so, consigning to them the personal responsibility for their “failure” and absolving society and the state of responsibility for the inequities that are in that way reproduced. Additionally, the privatization that often accompanies marketized education reforms has opened marginalized urban neighborhoods to capital investment in ways that threaten to dislodge the communities that have long-struggled in those spaces (Lipman, 2011b). Marketization can unlock the link between schools and housing but does so without safeguards to protect equitable access for those families most in need of improved schools. Thus, it is not that families did not make individualized education choices prior to neoliberal reforms; instead, neoliberal policy’s celebration of educational markets has fundamentally changed the way choice operates.

Parental “choices,” in the neoliberal context, are informed by how well schools “perform” as determined primarily by their students’ standardized test scores (Conner & Monahan, 2016; Hursh, 2007; Lipman, 2011b; Ravitch, 2010, 2013, 2016). In order for individual parents to choose schools, “they must have access to quantitative information, such as standardized test scores, that ... indicate the quality of the education provided” (Hursh, 2007, p. 498). Standardized tests are thus a critical component of neoliberal education markets, positioned as objective metrics of student learning and teacher and school quality that inform market choices and legitimate market discipline.

The role of parents in the neoliberal conception of public education is that of consumers, selecting the optimal school for their own children amidst a limited pool of “good” schools. Neoliberalism preferences such individual parental consumerism over collective parental engagement for policies

that benefit the many—e.g., desegregation, more equitable school funding, smaller class sizes (Cucchiara, 2013; Cucchiara, Gold, & Simon, 2011; Witten, Kearns, Lewis, Coster, & McCreanor, 2003). Cucchiara et al. (2011) found that this individual focus undercuts “the understanding of education as a public good” (p. 2460). Similarly, Anderson (1998) described neoliberalism’s conception of the parental role as a loss of “democratic participation” that shifted education from a collectively held responsibility to one carried only by parent/consumers:

[B]y framing participation as parents making rational choices for their own children, it is assumed that only those with a direct stake in schools (i.e., parents with children currently attending a local school) should participate. This limits schooling to being the equivalent of a consumer product rather than being a social institution charged with broader social objectives to serve a wider community of citizens. (p. 584)

The application of neoliberal strategies to education policy in recent decades has roots in mid-century opposition to school desegregation. MacLean (2017) traces the first substantial push for neoliberal education policies to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, which energized a diverse group of “radical” conservatives (p. 50). Some of these early neoliberals were motivated by a desire to “do away with the ‘public school system’ and see its buildings ‘leased off to individual groups of citizens and operated on a private basis’” (Chodorov as cited in MacLean, p. 50). Others saw *Brown* as “a step too far that could lead to a ‘political realignment’ as ‘an aroused and embittered South’ [found] allies among northerners who wanted to fight federal overreach” (LeFevre as cited in MacLean, 2017, p. 50). The early neoliberals strongly supported the use of taxpayer-funded vouchers to fund private schools for White children as one form of resistance to desegregation post *Brown* (MacLean, 2017).

Nearly thirty years later, the Reagan administration’s publication of *A Nation at Risk* provided a more mainstream rationale for neoliberal ideas about education, stating that our “very future as a Nation and a people” was threatened by “a rising tide of mediocrity” that was eroding “the educational foundations of our society” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5). To stay competitive, the U.S. had to reform its educational system and increase accountability and efficiency. Reagan’s successors in the White House echoed this sentiment. No Child Left Behind, George W. Bush’s first legislative priority upon assuming office, institutionalized nationally the use of high stakes standardized tests to evaluate, reward, and punish students, teachers and schools, including forcing schools to close or convert to charter schools. Obama’s *Race to the Top* (RTTT) initiative further “incentivize[d] market oriented policies” (Lipman, 2015, p. 58). To be competitive for \$4.35 billion in economic stimulus grants, states had to “agree to four “assurances,” a requirement that “led 33 state legislatures to change their laws in line with RTTT guidelines” (Lipman, 2015, p. 58). The RTTT reforms included linking student “test scores to teacher evaluation and compensation; rapid expansion of charter schools; development of data systems that facilitate remote control of schools and classrooms; and aggressive intervention for schools with low test scores, including closures, firing of staff, and various forms of state and private takeovers” (Karp, 2010). The impact of these “reforms” was felt most acutely by “urban school districts with majorities of low-income students of color” (Lipman, 2015, p. 58).

Hursh (2007) observed that “neoliberal ideals, although rarely explicitly stated, form the basis for most of the education reform proposals since [the 1983 publication of] *A Nation at Risk*” (p. 498). Indeed, over the last decade, bipartisan political support for neoliberal education reform has made its ascendancy seem inevitable, with observers warning that a vision of public education rooted in a collective commitment to equity, community, and democratic deliberation, is under threat (Hursh, 2016, 2017; Ravitch, 2010, 2013, 2016).¹ Despite its seeming omnipotence, however, the neoliberal conception of public schools and the individualistic role of parents has not gone unchallenged. A powerful and divergent stream of parental activism has emerged (Pappas, 2012) as parents have mobilized to demand systemic change through organizing strategies addressing a broad slate of concerns triggered by neoliberal education reforms, including removing public schools from local

democratic control; for-profit management of public schools; charter school expansions; forced school closings; and the growth of high-stakes standardized testing.

While, in one sense, this collective political activism and individual choice both represent the enactment of parental voices under neoliberalism, these two modes of engagement operate out of fundamentally different logics (Dehli, 1996), a distinction that we explore in the sections that follow. As neoliberal education reforms have gained momentum across the country, a diverse range of scholarship has explored the ways that parents enact their imposed roles as parent-consumers. This literature has challenged the neoliberal conception of parental choice, revealing the many factors shaping the enrollment decisions parents make and highlighting the ways that existing inequalities are reproduced through systems of market-driven and unregulated “choice.” By focusing on the enrollment decisions—the “choices”—that parents make within educational marketplaces, most of this literature has adopted as its analytical lens the view of parents as individual consumers conceptualized by neoliberal policy regimes. A separate and contrasting literature has emerged that highlights a very different role for parents under neoliberal regimes. This vision of parental action is rooted in collective organizing and democratic participation, most frequently in opposition to neoliberalism and in pursuit of public education rooted in local democratic governance and greater equity.²

In this paper, we review the academic literature examining these two visions of parental action under neoliberalism. We identify unanswered questions in the emerging literature on parental action via collective organizing and democratic participation and call for greater attention by education scholars to this important research domain. We begin by reviewing the literature on the ways parents enact their roles as consumers within the context of neoliberal school “choice.” We then shift our focus to the literature on parents acting collectively as democratic actors, reviewing the existing accounts and outlining a set of priorities for future research. We focus in particular on the past decade, which has seen an unprecedented expansion of neoliberal education reform policies and a corresponding increase in democratic engagement from parents across a range of economically and racially diverse communities. We turn now to a review of the existing literature on parents as consumers navigating neoliberal educational waters.

Enacting choice: Parents as consumers

Policies moving public education toward the neoliberal ideal of an educational marketplace have given rise to four primary arenas of academic research: (1) how neoliberal “choice” has affected learning outcomes, (2) how these policies have affected educational inequality and school segregation, (3) supply-side research into the ways schools have responded to competitive environments, and (4) demand-side research exploring the ways that parents act as consumers within the educational marketplace. In this section, we provide an overview of the last of these arenas, outlining the literature that has explored the ways parents make enrollment choices under neoliberal policies of increased school “choice.” This review is not exhaustive but identifies key questions and findings across what is a broad literature, highlighting in particular scholarship probing the ways race, class, geography, and information affect parent behavior and trouble idealized models of market choice. The purpose of this review is to characterize the breadth of questions scholars have asked about parent behavior in the era of neoliberal education. The core body of this scholarship has—appropriately—adopted the conceptual lens of the policy framework itself. That is, in studying how parents “choose,” the literature has focused on the ways that parents make *individualized consumer decisions* (though branches of the literature certainly acknowledge that these decisions may be significantly shaped by the relationships and social networks within which parents operate). While this lens is extremely important for understanding dynamics within neoliberal school “choice” regimes, we encourage scholars to transcend the individualized notion of parent-consumers in order to capture more fully the collective action of parent-citizens, which we review in the section that follows.

The motivating theory underlying expanded “choice” within public education is rooted in the premise that parents will enroll their children in schools that provide the “best” education among the options available to them (and that, faced with enrollment competition, schools will begin to deliver better education). In contrast, scholars have found that, in enacting “choices,” parents balance a variety of social and logistical factors alongside academic performance in making enrollment decisions for their children, including demographic composition of the student body, school location, transportation options and costs, conversations with teachers, childcare availability, extracurricular activities, and information available through parent social networks (Bosetti, 2004; Glazerman & Dotter, 2017; Harris & Larsen, 2017; Hastings, Kane, & Staiger, 2005; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012).

A central stream of this scholarship has focused on the ways parent enrollment decisions intersect with race and class dynamics and demographics, finding that parents’ school “choices” are strongly shaped by the race and class composition of schools (e.g., DeJarnatt, 2008; Fabricant & Fine, 2012, 2013; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017; Saporito & Lareau, 1999). For example, in a recent study, Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, Schellenberg, and Walters (2017) found that the correlation between parent choices and school effectiveness disappeared when they controlled for the academic performance of *incoming* students. That is, the data suggest that parents may be selecting schools based on their students’ demographic composition rather than on a school’s teaching effectiveness and ability to improve students’ academic performance. In another recent example, Billingham and Hunt (2016) found that race remains a significant factor in the enrollment decisions of white parents, who continue to opt for racially homogenous educational contexts. The authors confirm what many others have found: policies that portend to increase freedoms of “choice” empirically increase racial segregation and inequality in U.S. public education (e.g., Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Roda & Wells, 2013; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017).

A related set of findings has illuminated the ways that parent race and class positionality enhances or constrains the options available to them within regimes of school “choice,” directly challenging the neoliberal rhetoric that “choice” policies increase options for all families (e.g., James, 2014; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013; Phillips, Hausman, & Larsen, 2012). Fundamentally, the capacity of “choice” policies to mitigate educational inequalities is limited by the substantial income and wealth differences across school districts, so that within metropolitan regions, the options students can consider is limited by their families’ abilities to afford to live in wealthier districts (Goyette, 2008). Beyond this fundamental bounding of schooling options by housing market affordability, scholars have illuminated the ways that social, economic, and racial positionality differentially shape the “choice” landscapes that parents can access. For example, Bell (2009b) studied the “bounded rationalities” at play in parents’ selection of schools for their children, concluding that “choice” policies must take into account “the almost invisible social and historical inequities that constrain the schools parents are willing to consider” (p. 206). Similarly, in her studies of school “choices” made by low-income African American Cooper (2005, 2007) found enrollment decisions and decision-making processes to fundamentally reflect their distinct race, class, and gender standpoints. Pattillo (2015) described the experiences of low-income African American parents in Chicago navigating school choice processes, finding that parents knew what they were looking for, but understood themselves to be unable to realize those goals due to the limitations of their race and class positionality within the system.

In contrast, as Aggarwal (2014) found in her study of the ways parents—both wealthier and poorer—acted on behalf of their children’s educations in a highly diverse district in New York City, the political and economic power of wealthier parents allowed them to leverage the resources necessary to transform schools in ways that poorer parents were unable to do. Aggarwal’s findings fit within a more recent and growing body of literature that has focused on the ways that middle class parents are re-engaging with public schools in many U.S. cities, in processes that often intersect with patterns of gentrification and neighborhood change (e.g., Posey-Maddox, 2016; Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, & Cucchiara, 2014). In the same way that demand-side theories of gentrification describe the consumption of urban experiences as part of a process of identity construction for middle class

individuals, scholars have found that opting into traditional public schools supports conceptualizations of an urban lifestyle for middle-class parents (Bosetti, 2004; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Hankins, 2007; Holme, 2002; Nelson, 2018).

A smaller stream of scholarship has described the ways that geography shapes “choice,” with proximity to home playing a key role for many parents that in some cases can override even concerns about academic performance (e.g., de la Torre, Gordon, Moore, & Cowhy, 2015; Theobald, 2005). Beyond proximity, access to transportation options also delineate a geography of access that overlays pure conceptualizations of a free market of school “choice” (André-Bechely, 2007; Hochbein & FitzGerald, 2018). The feasibility of attendance is shaped by parents’ abilities to get children to their respective schools in a timely and affordable manner that accommodates their own work schedules. School start and end times, and the availability of before and aftercare services, can dictate whether schools located at a distance are possibilities or not (Harris & Larsen, 2017). Drawing on her study of a large school district in the Los Angeles area, André-Bechely (2007) argued that providing school “choice” to parents who do not have the resources to physically access those choices perpetuates historical inequalities of race, class, and space. In addition to the logistics of transportation and distance, a few scholars have explored how geographies of identification shape the schools parents are willing to consider. For example, Bell (2009a) found that histories in, and beliefs about, the specific neighborhoods where schools are located influence parents’ enrollment decisions (see also Yoon, 2016).

Market behavior is shaped by the information to which consumers have access, and another set of scholarship has explored the ways that the types of school performance data accessible to parents affects their enrollment decisions. Publicly collected performance data represents one potential avenue for leveling school “choice” playing fields by making it easier for all parents to understand the strengths and weaknesses of different schools they might consider. The effectiveness of this approach, however, is determined by the types of data collected and the manner in which it is distributed and made accessible (Marschall, 2000; Schneider, 2001). As Garcia (2011) argued, federal policy that marries accountability through student performance metrics with efforts to increase enrollment options—to expand “choice”—over the past 25 years has created an inherent challenge for state compliance, as it is difficult to communicate the results of complicated accountability metrics in ways that parents can digest. Others have explored the ways that over-reliance on narrow measures of test performance can mask the broader dimensions of a school’s characteristics and objectives (e.g., Schwartz, Hamilton, Stecher, & Steele, 2011). In a qualitative study of low-income parents participating in school choice processes in Philadelphia, Neild (2005) found that parents struggled to access adequate public data on schools they were considering, including student performance, course offerings, teacher retention, and their children’s likelihood of admission. Faced with inadequate public data, many parents relied on their social networks to inform school enrollment decisions. Identifying an additional challenge to providing helpful information to parents, Lubienski’s (2007) review of school promotional materials in a competitive marketplace revealed efforts to play to emotional registers and to attract the strongest students, objectives that work against parent access to useful, playing-field-leveling data.³

Beyond the basic requirement of access to helpful school performance data, scholars have begun to look carefully at the formats in which those data are presented, as parents’ use of school performance data and their interpretations of what they mean are mediated through the mediums in which the data are communicated to them. For example, in a review of “choice guides” provided to parents in ten large U.S. urban school districts, Stein and Nagro (2015) found that none of the guides were written in language appropriate for all parents to understand (5th-8th grade level), all the guides required parents to be reading at a 12th grade level, and many were complex enough so as to require parents to be reading at the college level. Others have studied how the presentation of school data may affect parent perceptions of school performance and ultimately the enrollment decisions they make. Jacobsen, Snyder, and Saultz (2014) found that the format in which school performance is communicated (A–F grades vs. numerical scores) shapes how parents perceive

a school's performance, with parents perceiving a letter grade "A" to reflect higher performance and a "C" lower performance than the corresponding numerical values, the meaning of which was perceived to be less clear. In a preliminary descriptive analysis, Glazerman (2017) reviewed the design of fourteen "school shopping websites" that provide "consumer information" about schools to parents. Finding significant variation in the design of such websites, he argued that a better understanding of the types of information presented to parents—and the ways that information is presented—is critical to understanding parent behavior within "choice" regimes and ultimately the equity outcomes of such systems.

In sum, the preponderance of the literature on parent behavior within neoliberal school "choice" regimes has focused on how parents, as individual consumers, make enrollment decisions for their children. These literatures have challenged simple conceptualizations of educational marketplaces, where parent selection of the highest performing schools holds schools accountable to more effectively educate their students, finding that parent behavior is significantly shaped by race and class preferences, structural positionality, geography, and differential access to school information. This diverse body of scholarship has challenged the core assertion that market efficiencies will lead to better and more equal educational outcomes. Scholarship within these streams has also made clear that the willingness of poor parents of color to enter lotteries and line up to secure better schools for their children attests not to their pro-school-choice politics, but to the state's falling short of these parents' visions of educational opportunity and equity (Pattillo, 2015). Given the entrenched limitations of a system that has failed them for many years, low-income parents have made use of school "choice" policies to access better schools, as neighborhood schools struggle for adequate resources or close altogether (Lipman, 2011a). The logic enacted through these choices, however, differs from the market-ideology that many proponents invoke in advocating for these programs and represents a tactical choice amidst compromised options (Pedroni, 2005, 2006).

As we review in the section that follows, parental action in response to neoliberal school "choice" regimes has increasingly overflowed the banks of the individualized "choices" conceptualized by neoliberal policy reforms, as parents have organized collective action to challenge the underlying framework of neoliberal "choice" itself. We argue that this flowering of collective action as democratic participants represents a fundamentally different domain of parental action from individual choice and call for education scholars to more fully describe and make sense of the ways parents are working together in the context of neoliberal education reform, to enact a vision of public education rooted in local democratic governance and equity.⁴

Engaged and collective activism: Parents as democratic citizens

In this section, we draw on academic literature to trace the contours of the landscape of collective parental activism in the era of neoliberal education reform. This literature has focused on parental organizing in opposition to neoliberal reform, in particular charter school expansions, traditional public school closures, and high stakes standardized testing. We highlight the broadening of parental coalitions beyond the low income communities of color that have been most adversely affected by neoliberal reforms to include wealthier and whiter communities, particularly evident in the movement to opt out of standardized testing. We also rely on lay literature to highlight emergent trends, such as the impact of regional and national parental organizations and blogger networks opposed to neoliberal reform.

Parents engaging collectively as democratic actors in local schools, statewide campaigns, and national movements is not a new phenomenon. Beyond the long-standing work on parental "entrepreneurship" for children with disabilities (Green, Darling, & Wilbers, 2013), parents, particularly those of color, have often taken substantial risks to fight for educational justice, including campaigns for bilingual education, racial integration, finance equity, community control, educational adequacy, and other forms of meaningful school reform (Podair, 2002; Back, 2003; Fabricant, 2010; Fabricant & Fine, 2012, 2013; Lipman, 2011a; Warren, 2005; 2011; Warren & Mapp, 2011;; Lipman,

2017). Starting in the late 1980s, as neoliberalism fueled and legitimated growing elite support of private, for-profit management of public schools as well as conversions of neighborhood public schools to charter schools, parents began to engage in a different type of organizing as communities mobilized to resist these initial waves of neoliberal reform (Scott, 2011).

Such parental organizing has generally been precipitated by specific threats. For example, Scott and Fruchter (2009) detail the successful 2001 campaign by a coalition of local parent groups, the New York City teacher's union, and the New York chapter of the community organizing group ACORN to stop the city from converting five public schools into charter schools and turning their control over to a for-profit school management corporation. Similarly, Maranto (2005) contrasts responses of communities in Philadelphia and Chester to the state of Pennsylvania's efforts to turn some public schools over to for-profit management. Glazer and Egan (2018) note growing community resistance to the conversion of local public schools to charter schools by the state-run Tennessee Achievement School District.

School closings have been particularly catalyzing events. Lipman (2017) observed that Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's 2004 launch of Renaissance 2010, "a dramatic plan to make school closings and privatization the centerpiece of [Chicago Public Schools'] 'reform' agenda ... was the spark that ignited a grassroots opposition movement ... led by coalitions of Black and Latinx community organizations, teacher and parent groups, students, and later the Chicago Teachers Union" (pp 7–8). Similarly, Simon, Quinn, Golden, and Cohen (2017) found that the December 2012 announcement by Philadelphia Superintendent William Hite of a proposed closing of approximately one sixth of District-managed public schools "reenergized activism" among Philadelphia's existing community and parent groups, galvanizing them to challenge "the predominant narrative that market reform and extreme austerity for public schools was the only route forward" (p. 62). Newark parents and community members also mobilized in response to Newark Superintendent Cami Anderson's 2011 plans to close local public schools as part of a broader neoliberal reform initiative (Danley & Rubin, 2017, 2019; Murphy, Strothers, & Lugg, 2017; Russakoff, 2015).

School closings are not inherently neoliberal. However, they play an important role in neoliberal education theory, which posits that, as parents choose schools—whether district, charter, or private—the schools not selected will be forced to downsize and close, as would a restaurant or store that could not attract enough customers. In reality, communities are reluctant to close their public schools, which serve many purposes beyond educating students (Lytton, 2011; Witten et al., 2003). To neutralize the resistance to school closings (and other unpopular measures), neoliberal reformers have increasingly turned to state laws that allow school districts or individual schools to be removed from local democratic control and replaced with appointed boards or state managers (Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, 2015; Conner & Monahan, 2016; Danley & Rubin, 2019; Epstein, 2006; Gutierrez & Waitoller, 2017; Harvey, 2005; Lipman, 2015; Morel, 2018).

Urban communities of color have been the most frequent targets of such tactics (Morel, 2018; Oluwole & Green, 2009). Epstein (2006) detailed one of the earliest examples – the 1988 efforts by a coalition of white state and county officials to wrest control of Oakland's public schools away from the majority Black school board through a state takeover. Consistent with this, Morel (2018) found that state takeovers of school districts disproportionately affect "black communities with higher levels of political empowerment" (p. 11). Connecting the growth of such governance mechanisms to the rise of conservative, Republican-dominated politics at the state level, he (Morel, 2018) argued that the takeovers are motivated by political power and control of resources in response to "black political empowerment in U.S. cities" (p. 11).

Chicago, Philadelphia and Newark school closings were all implemented through mechanisms of political disenfranchisement, with state power being used to create and support markets, even in the face of strong popular resistance (Harvey, 2005). In each of these school closing scenarios, parental mobilization came up against the lack of democratic governance—imposed through mechanisms such as state control of school districts and the replacement of elected school boards with appointed ones—that has become a feature of neoliberal education reform (Conner & Monahan, 2016; Danley

& Rubin, 2019; Gutierrez & Waitoller, 2017; Lipman, 2015; Morel, 2018). Lipman (2017), for example, describes the inability of Chicago residents to influence their appointed Board of Education “despite candlelight vigils, pickets, rallies, sleep-outs in front of the Board of Education in winter, press conferences, public testimonials, tears and outrage, and data that countered a narrative of failure, the appointed [Chicago] Board of Education mostly rubber stamped the mayor’s annual list of schools to be closed” (p. 8).

Although parents and coalition partners have not stopped all the school closings and charter conversions in Chicago and other cities, their organizing has had significant impacts. In Philadelphia and Newark, for example, protest of school closings contributed to the election of pro-public education mayors and the subsequent return of local control of city school boards (Danley & Rubin, 2017, 2019; Resseger, 2018). In Tennessee, growing community opposition to the state-imposed conversion of local public schools to charter schools resulted in the creation of Neighborhood Advisory Councils, at least half of whose seats must go to parents, and which have the power to decide if a local public school is converted into a charter school (Glazer & Egan, 2016). In Chicago, the grassroots coalition of “Black and Latinx community organizations and parent and teacher groups” that fought the school closings became the foundation for subsequent organizing campaigns, including the takeover of the Chicago Teachers Union by the progressive Caucus of Rank and File Educators and two “city-wide advisory referenda for an elected school board” that won “with nearly 90% approval ... put the mayor on the defensive and launched a drive for state legislation mandating an elected representative school board for Chicago” (Lipman, 2017, p. 9). Education was prominent in the February 2019 campaign for mayor of Chicago, with both of the top vote getters endorsing a democratically-elected school board and a freeze on new charter schools (Bosman, Smith, & Davey, 2019; Emmanuel, 2018; Where 14 candidates for mayor, 2018).

Parental organizing has contested the disproportionate adverse impact of neoliberal reforms on low income communities of color, exacerbating racial and economic inequalities, and also advocated for educational investment and innovation in these very communities. For example, the role of race and class is prominent in efforts by parents, students, and teachers of color to stop the wholesale replacement of New Orleans public schools with charter schools (Buras, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Dixon, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015). In describing the impetus for this resistance, Dixon et al. (2015) note “the overwhelming Whiteness of the education reform movement in New Orleans” in which “Black teachers and administrators have been displaced and replaced by a younger and whiter teaching force” and “a majority of the decision-makers and policy makers are White” (p. 297). Good (2017) found that low-income parents of color anticipated the disparate impact that the 2013 Philadelphia school closings would have on their communities and actively invoked “the spatiality of race and class inequality in their protests” (p. 359). Glazer and Egan (2018) concluded that community opposition to the state-run Tennessee Achievement School District reflects perception of it as part of “a legacy of White oppression of African Americans” (p. 25).

Lipman (2017) highlights that the Chicago public “schools that were closed were places of African American cultural and intellectual achievements,” reflecting a struggle for racial justice by parents and community members, going back to the early 1960s (p. 14). Connecting neoliberal education reform and anti-Black state violence, Lipman (2017) recounts the 34-day hunger strike that twelve African American parents, grandparents, teachers and supporters waged in 2015 to reopen and transform Dyett High School:

The hunger strike became both a demonstration of Black parents’ determination to fight for quality public education—as they envision it—and a display of the state’s apparent disregard for Black parents and children. Even as hunger strikers grew weaker and several were hospitalized, city officials did nothing, although doctors and nurses pleaded with the mayor to intervene in a life-threatening situation. At a press conference announcing the end of the hunger strike, a mother on hunger strike said, “It’s been very disappointing that the mayor of Chicago will allow us to die even though we knew that he would do that because he’s allowed Black children in our streets to die every day.” (p. 17)

The racialized aspects of neoliberal reform have been noted by civil rights organizations including Journey for Justice Alliance (J4J), which consists of charter- and public-school parents from cities across the country; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; and The Black Lives Matter Movement. Both J4J and the Black Lives Matter Movement have called for an end to public school closures and “increased investments in traditional community schools and the health and social services they provide” (Rizga, 2016). All three organizations support a moratorium on charter schools (Rizga, 2016). Jitu Brown, who leads J4J and was one of the Dyett High School hunger strikers, pointed out that charter schools “have increased segregation” and “contributed to the national decline in the number of black teachers” (Strauss, 2016).

Over the last decade, as the scale of neoliberal education reform has increased and moved beyond low income communities of color to more middle class and white communities, parental mobilization has likewise expanded. Parents have engaged with a broad range of other coalitions, and have organized across urban-suburban, racial, class and ideological divides (Ferman, 2017a, b; Rubin, 2017, 2019; Blumenreich & Jaffe-Walter, 2015).

For example, Lipman (2017) describes how the Chicago parental coalition broadened as the budget cuts instituted by the mayorally-controlled public schools following the financial crisis of 2008 helped bring “white middle class families into conflict with CPS, face to face with an imperious school board, and in contact with Black and Latinx parents whose neighborhood schools had been perpetually under-resourced and were threatened with closure” (p. 9). Excessive high stakes testing subsequently “triggered an anti-testing backlash and student opt out movement, with much of the impetus coming from ... middle class parents” (Lipman, 2017, p. 18).

Tracing the cross-constituent mobilizations in Chicago, Stovall (2017) notes that:

students, parents, teachers, families and concerned community members have been organizing themselves to build collective strategies to address their needs. They have been organizing in organized labor formations (e.g. Chicago Teachers Union Action Now!), parent groups (Parents4Teachers, Raise Your Hand), student groupings (ONE Chicago, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Assata’s Daughters), and coalitions (Grassroots Education Movement, Pathways to Justice). All of these organizations are working to solidify transparency and accountability on issues like special education, school budgeting, and governance. This has led to a push for a locally elected school board and a moratorium on school closings. (Para 5)

Rubin (2017, 2019) details the creation of the statewide grassroots organization Save Our Schools NJ by upper-middle class suburban parents who were motivated by their opposition to the neoliberal education agenda of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, including the aggressive promotion of taxpayer funded school vouchers; expansion of charter schools; reduction in school funding to high poverty school districts; and attacks on public school teachers. In growing the organization, the more privileged founding parents reached out to parents in high poverty communities across the state, to ensure that Save Our Schools NJ included them and represented the issues that their schools faced.

In another New Jersey example, Blumenreich and Jaffe-Walter (2015) document the creation of Montclair Cares About Schools (MCAS) by parents in the racially integrated community of Montclair, in response to their new superintendent’s plans to expand standardized testing and implement a new teacher evaluation system. MCAS worked closely with the Montclair Education Association and the Montclair 250 (250 union members who were also parents in the district), creating a significant and sustained multiracial, parent-educator-labor coalition.

Once formed, these parent groups have expanded their agendas to encompass opposition to other neoliberal education policies, as well as support for equity-oriented reforms such as performance assessments, small class sizes, restorative justice, and multi-cultural curriculum. Four years after Save Our Schools NJ was created, its volunteer parent leadership decided to add opposition to high stakes standardized testing to the group’s policy agenda of progressive school funding, opposition to privatization, and reform of the state’s charter school laws (Rubin, 2017, 2019). Similarly, Montclair Cares About Schools expanded beyond district issues, working with activists in Newark and Maplewood/South Orange, to support each other’s local struggles and to advocate in a single

voice against various aspects of neoliberal reform at both the local and state levels (Blumenreich & Jaffe-Walter, 2015).

Perhaps the largest and most diverse parental mobilization to date is the movement to opt out of standardized testing. During the 2014–2015 school year, more than 650,000 students across the country took part (FairTest, 2016). Kamenetz (2015) traces parental opt outs to May 2001 when, shortly after passage of federal No Child Left Behind legislation enshrined the requirement of annual high stakes standardized testing for all students in grades 3 to 8, parents at Scarsdale (New York) Middle School organized a test boycott. One of the parents pointed out that “Many students do not perform well on standardized tests. These kinds of tests reduce content, they reduce imagination, they limit complex curriculum, they add stress and cost money” (p. 116).

Parental opposition to high stakes standardized testing grew slowly over the subsequent decade but exploded during the 2014–2015 academic year, following the widescale adoption of a new generation of Common Core aligned tests developed by the PARCC and Smarter Balanced testing consortia, with funding from the U.S. Department of Education (Ravitch, 2016). The new tests were more difficult and time consuming than their predecessors, and had to be administered online, leading to increased costs for computers and internet capacity and concerns about equity for low-income students who had limited access and experience with computers (Koretz, 2017; Rubin, 2019).

Both conservative and liberal parents in communities of diverse sizes and geographies have taken part in resistance to standardized testing. Some are driven by objections to the common core standards and others to the tests themselves and their impact on students, teachers and public schools (Ferman, 2017a, 2017b; Ravitch, 2016; Wilson, Hastings, & Moses, 2016; Supovitz, Stephens, Kubelka, McGuinn, & Ingersoll, 2016).

Initial studies of the opt out movement focused on who opted out and why they did so. Those findings quickly became tools in the polarized political environment surrounding neoliberal education reform (Wang, 2017). For example, Pizmony-levy and Green Saraisky (2016) conducted online surveys of parents solicited via opt out social media sites and concluded that the national opt out movement was primarily white, suburban and economically privileged. Bennett (2016) made a similar claim, drawing on select accounts from New York, Colorado and Washington State. Such findings led some opponents of the opt out movement to adopt the hashtag #optoutsowhite (Quinlan, 2016).

Conversely, Wilson et al. (2016) pointed out that Pizmony-Levy and Saraisky’s methodology diminished “the possibility of capturing opt out participants who do not have access to the internet or those who are not engaged with these online communities” (p. 235). Neill (2016) observed that opt out rates by race and income varied by state, making national generalizations impossible. Opt out activists of color also challenged the #optoutsowhite characterization as inaccurate, politically motivated, and intended to minimize the significant interest and involvement of many low income communities of color in the opt out movement (Hagopian, 2015; Killough, 2016; Plock, 2016; Quinlan, 2016; Rubin, 2019).

Other studies have examined the ways opt out movement participants framed high stakes testing and their own messaging, in order to accomplish their objectives. Abraham, Wassell, Luet, and Vitalone-Racrarro (2018) explored the counter-narratives that New Jersey opt out parents constructed to challenge the testing mandate narratives put forth by the state’s education policymakers and individual school districts. Wang (2017) examined how supporters of the New York state opt out movement framed high stakes testing as parents’ loss of control over education, to motivate “many parents to act beyond their parochial interests in their own children to advocate for the policy change in standardized testing” (p. 17). Mitra, Mann, and Hlavacik (2016) found that United Opt Out Activists exploited ambiguity in state testing policies to circumvent the stringent federal testing requirements under NCLB. These accounts highlight that, even when parent activism did not lead to outright policy wins, it helped to reframe or somewhat mitigate high stakes standardized testing policies to create room for oppositional narratives and actions.

Mitra et al. (2016) also detail the important role that social media has played in the opt out movement, noting that United Opt Out served as “a virtual community ... in which parents could exercise their voice within an ambiguous policy structure and gain information that facilitated their ability to resist that policy” (p. 12). Consistent with the use of social media in other organizing contexts (see Cammaerts, 2015), multiple studies document how local, regional, and national parental mobilizations have used social media—particularly Facebook—to reach across distances and busy schedules to access policy information, networks, and organizing ideas (Abraham et al., 2018; Rubin, 2019; Blumenreich & Jaffe-Walter, 2015; Schroeder, Currin, & McCardle, 2016, 2018; Thapliyal, 2018; Ferman, 2017a, 2017b; Mitra et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2016). For example, Gay Adelman, the founder of Save Our Schools Kentucky, modeled that organization on Save Our Schools NJ, which she learned about via Facebook (Rubin, 2019). Similarly, parents from thirty-two communities across New Jersey created local Cares About Schools Facebook groups based on the model pioneered by Montclair Cares About Schools, to facilitate organizing and information sharing (Rubin, 2019).

Parents also obtained information from regional and national coalitions such as Parents Across America (PAA) and a national network of education bloggers that formed in opposition to neoliberal reform (Rubin, 2019; Wang, 2017). PAA was launched in early 2011 by fourteen public education advocates from across the country. By 2018, the organization had 46 chapters and affiliates in 26 states (Parents Across America, n.d.). In 2013, educator and blogger Anthony Cody and education historian Diane Ravitch, who had become a nationally-recognized leader of the movement against neoliberal reform after the publication of her 2010 book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, founded The Network for Public Education (NPE) (Ravitch, 2016). NPE is a national advocacy group working to connect parents, students, teachers, and citizens “who are passionate about our schools” and to “share information and research” to help “public education at a time when it is under attack” (NPE, 2018). By 2017, NPE’s national membership had swelled to more than 350,000, driven by its online campaign to convince the U.S. Senate to reject President Trump’s nomination of Betsy DeVos for Secretary of Education (Ravitch, 2017). In 2012, Ravitch, launched an education policy blog that she uses to share information and to “embolden ... many people ... to speak out” (Ravitch, 2017). Within five years, the blog had reached 30 million views (Ravitch, 2017). Ravitch’s blog also broadens the reach of the “more than 200 education reporters, advocacy journalists, investigative bloggers, and commentators” who constitute The Education Bloggers Network (Edubloggers, 2018). Formed in 2013, the Education Bloggers Network works closely with Progressive Magazine and with NPE to reach and inform a greater number of public education supporters (Blumenreich & Jaffe-Walter, 2015).

Moving toward a broader understanding of parental participation under neoliberalism

The expansion of neoliberal policy logics into the realm of public education has both elevated the ideal of parental “choice” and profoundly constrained the conceptualization of parental action. Neoliberal choice policies have created options for some parents to enroll their students in schools outside traditional catchment areas as part of an effort to infuse market efficiencies and discipline into public education. Parental choice in this framework, however, is limited to an individual parent’s agency as a consumer. In practice, of course, the behavior of parents under neoliberal policy regimes has not been limited to that of consumers/choosers. Instead, parents have participated in a wide and diverse array of engaged and collective actions, many of which have challenged the expansion of neoliberal education policies, particularly in the realms of privatization, charter school expansion, school closures, and high-stakes testing.

In this paper, we review the academic literature examining these two visions of parental action under neoliberalism and call for education scholars to address the limitations in our understanding of how parents are acting collectively—as engaged activists and democratic citizens (Dehli, 1996)—within

contexts of neoliberal education reform and governance. The academic literature describing and making sense of this field of action is still emerging, particularly for the more recent parental mobilizations that reach beyond low-income communities of color. At the most fundamental level, we need a more comprehensive understanding of what kinds of parental actions are taking place—both in support of and opposition to neoliberal education policies, what it means for the parents involved, and what it reveals about the political economy of neoliberal education reform. Toward that end, we propose the following research priorities and questions to guide this agenda.

First, we call on scholars to more fully map the parameters and drivers of parental mobilization, both in support of and opposition to neoliberal education policies. Where is this type of parental mobilization occurring and what strategies do parent groups use to organize, build coalitions, and drive action? How do parent organizing groups work through issues of race, gender, class, language, immigration status, disability, and geography, both within their groups and in coalition with aligned local and national groups? How do these issues impact mobilization and organizing strategies? How do efforts to develop something new (alternatives to high stakes testing, restorative justice, community schools) intersect with efforts to resist changes deemed problematic? What interests and groups are working with parents in different places and toward what objectives? How do parents develop and sustain coalitions, including those that integrate or support the concerns of labor unions and community-based organizations? How do new forms or platforms of mobilization (such as social media) impact organizing strategies and the composition of coalitions?

Second, we urge scholars to consider the ways that parents act individually in the interests of their own children and collectively on behalf of broader community or societal interests, and the implications this has for local communities. How do parents make sense of their individual enrollment decisions in light of involvements in collective mobilizations? How does race and class positionality and political involvement impact parents' enrollment decisions? How do parents understand the relationship between historical educational inequities and the inequities generated by neoliberal reform?

Finally, we encourage scholars to situate these research projects within the broader political economy of neoliberalism, to address questions such as how parents engaged in mobilization understand the private interests (for-profit, ideological, and/or philanthropic) that drive and benefit from the expansion of neoliberal policy? How do parent groups situate themselves vis-à-vis the network of actors and organizations funding and advocating for and against neoliberal reform? How does the structural positionality of parents and communities (including race, class, and geography) shape the interactions and relationships that parent mobilizations have with funders of neoliberal reforms? And, how do mobilizations around education intersect or align with mobilizations around other community concerns impacted by neoliberalism, such as housing, employment and economic development?

Addressing these questions will deepen our understanding of the diverse roles that parents are playing as engaged activists and democratic citizens in contexts of neoliberal education reform and governance. This more comprehensive representation of parental action is particularly critical for informing the policy debate as neoliberal reforms are advanced from the highest political offices—and without acknowledgment of the complex roles parents play, the difficulty of the “choices” they may or may not be able to make, or the diverse sets of collective and engaged actions many parents undertake.

This is a thrilling and distressing moment in the struggle for public, equitable, well-funded, and integrated education. Federal supports for equity are being withdrawn, state battles over privatization and school funding rage on, and opponents of public education are rich in financial and political resources. Yet, we cannot go a day without hearing, loud and clear, the voices of parents across the country, in coalition with students, teachers, and community stakeholders, fighting for educational systems that are fair, effective, and not reduced to a succession of high-stakes standardized tests within ad-hoc and inadequately overseen collections of privately managed schools. It is our responsibility as scholars of public education to honor and document the full breadth and complexity of

these arenas of parental action, which spill far beyond the narrow banks of parental “choice” imagined by neoliberal reforms.

The articles in this special issue interrogate how parents, educators and students are navigating across the radically redesigned landscape of school “choice” in ways always raced and classed, constrained and resisting. In a context where school reform debates are often dissociated from the histories of racial and economic injustice that have shaped the communities in which schools operate, we underscore the importance of connecting these dots. To that end, this interdisciplinary set of papers speaks to the political economy of urban education and its entanglement with “development,” how race matters in school selection and attitudes toward closure, where and how resistance to charter schools and high stakes testing has been mobilized, and the racialized reach and impact of zero tolerance discipline policies. With a wide angle view of the policies and practices borne in neoliberal logics, these articles reveal the consequences, the resistance, and the alternatives, infused with a sense of outrage, equity and hope.

Notes

1. This conception of public education does not ignore the history of deep and long-standing inequities in our public schools that have reflected and reproduced racial and economic injustices. Rather, it is an aspirational vision—an ideal type—to guide what public education should be.
2. We recognize that parents engaged in collective action have diverse objectives—including individual benefits for their own children as well as greater opportunities for all children—and different conceptions of what optimal public education entails.
3. At the school level, the motivating theory behind school “choice” policies assumes that schools will work to improve their academic performance in order to attract students. In reality, studies have found that schools in competitive environments devote more resources to marketing, working to attract more students by burnishing their image in the marketplace (Jabbar, 2015; Kasman & Loeb, 2013; Lubienski, 2005). Schools may also respond as political actors. In a case study of charter schools in Washington, DC, Henig, Holyoke, Lacireno-Paquet, and Moser (2003) found that, rather than behaving strictly as actors within a market, charter schools often relied on political advocacy and lobbying to address problems they face—that is, they worked to change the market itself.
4. We recognize that parents engaged in collective action have diverse objectives—including individual benefits for their own children as well as greater opportunities for all children—and different conceptions of what optimal public education entails.

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