

Chi-Town Educator and Community-Based Activism: Confronting a Legacy of Education Privatization in the Nation's Windy City

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Abstract

The predominance of research and data examining public education privatization in Chicago indicate that there are few financial savings, decreased student achievement, increased racial inequality, increased class size, and increased violence. Considering these outcomes, educators and community-based stakeholders have not remained silent in the face of this apparent injustice. In this paper, we examine teacher and community-based activism in Chicago situated amongst the local and broader reform efforts to which they fight against. We focus on strategies implemented by educator and community-based activists in response to the broader aims of school reforms, those specific to Chicago, and more broadly across the United States. We conclude by discussing the implications of the strategies that have been borne out of the activism in Chicago as well as across the country.

Keywords: *activism, Chicago, community-based, privatization, school reform*

The effort to reform education across the United States and internationally through what Pasi Sahlberg (2012) calls the Global Education Reform Movement (or GERM) has thoroughly reimagined the purpose of education through the lens of schooling and markets. Guided by the persistent assumption that public education has failed (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Berliner & Glass, 2014), education reformers assert that it is, in fact, government public education that is innately inefficient and ineffective at the management of schools and they should, therefore, be turned over to the hands of private enterprise (Greene, Forster, & Winters, 2005; McShane, 2014; McShane, Wolf, & Hitt, 2018; Walberg & Bast, 2003). Yet, the only way to make sense of a reimagining of public education as an endeavor best organized and overseen by private control is to recharacterize the benefits of education as individualistic goods, or commodities. It is through the recharacterization of education as a commodity that markets make sense in both discursive and practical applications. Private business terminology is thrust onto what was once considered a sheltered public cornerstone of democracy and, instead, is now understood in terms of a private good (Barkan, 2017; Labaree, 1988, 1997).

Concurrent with the reimagining of education along private market-oriented lines (Ball, 2012; Friedman, 1955, 1997, 2002) is the scapegoating of teachers and communities (Goldstein,

2014; Kumashiro, 2012). Teachers are, according to the reformer logic, the fundamental flaw within the educational system (Kopp, 1989, 2001; Kopp & Farr, 2011). Communities, we are told, are the root cause of the persistent achievement gap, and by extension bear the blame of systemic socioeconomic inequality throughout the United States (Ahlquist, Gorski, & Montano, 2011; Berliner, 2006). Reformers understand schools in terms of providing an equal playing field for all students and the failure to ameliorate broad systemic inequality is the result of “bad teachers” and dysfunctional, violent communities who seemingly do not take the required ownership and blame for their failings (Farr, 2010; Payne, 2003).

The education “reformer” approach has simultaneously been implemented in Chicago, New York, and Washington D.C.—three of the national largest cities—and many other cities across the United States (Wong et al., 2007). In Chicago, arguably the birthplace of the school privatization movement in the 1950s (Portales & Vasquez Heilig, 2013), former Mayor Richard Daley announced the Renaissance 2010 initiative in 2004, which sought to close 60 public schools and open 100 new charter, contract or district schools by 2010 (Lipman, 2009). The initial conductor on the journey toward privatization and private control was former Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan—who later became Barack Obama’s Secretary of Education. Then in 2011, Mayor Rahm Israel Emanuel was elected. Emmanuel, also a neoliberal-leaning Democratic mayor of Chicago, continued the implementation of the top-down and private-management styled education reforms via mayoral control in Chicago—including school closings in primarily minority neighborhoods and the mass opening of charter schools. Moore and Cohen (2014) reported that, since the mid-1990s when mayoral control began in Chicago, 135 neighborhood public schools have been closed in Chicago and 122 charter schools were opened. In 2013, Chicago placed a five-year moratorium on school closings, which will end in 2018—more closings of public schools are expected (Strauss, 2018).

Chicago charter and public schools are some of America’s most segregated urban spaces—racially (Vasquez Heilig, Brewer, & Williams, in press) and resource-wise (Morenoff, Sampson, & Raudenbush, 2001). Contrasting two schools in Chicago provides the context to begin to understand the differences. Agassiz Elementary and Irvin C. Mollison Elementary are two neighborhood grammar schools in different communities. Agassiz is nestled in the Central Lakeview Community on Chicago’s North Side and is not far from the home of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Mollison sits in the historic, predominantly Black Bronzeville community on the South Side of Chicago. Agassiz, which is about 40% White, has had about 470 students while Mollison, which is more than 95% Black, has approximately 370 students (GoCPS, n.d.; GreatSchools, n.d.). The size of the student population is where the similarities end, however. Mollison has had one teacher’s aide in the entire building while Agassiz has had a teacher aide cadre of 10. Students at Agassiz have had a fully stocked library with a librarian while Mollison students have had a library but, as is the case in many schools in Black and Brown communities in Chicago, no librarian. Students at Agassiz learn Arabic and Spanish while parents at Mollison have had to advocate for a part-time Spanish instructor. The student-to-teacher ratio at Agassiz is 14 to 1, while in 2017 there were more than 40 students in a combined kindergarten/first grade class at Mollison. In fact, the Mollison was so crowded that students with special needs had to meet under the stairs.

The challenge with mayoral control of schools is the potential for politics and money to take precedence over students’ well-being and success. While mayoral control has not remedied resource inequity across Chicago, it is a fair question to ask: Has mayoral-led school closure

led to improved success for students? A report by Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates for Transformative Education (CReATE), a group of Chicago-area university professors specializing in educational research, summarized research from the field that has found school closures in Chicago have historically had a negative impact on children's academic performance (Farmer et al., 2013). They relayed that 94% of students from closed Chicago Public Schools (CPS) schools did not have access to "academically strong" new schools, their class sizes were larger and experienced increased overcrowding. The students from closed schools also had lower test scores and were more likely to drop out of school and their neighborhoods experienced a spike in violence after closure.

A common argument heard in Chicago and elsewhere is that school closure will result in large savings for the public. Farmer et al. (2013) argued that Chicago has had difficulty disposing of school buildings and that national studies of school closing have consistently been underestimated or understated by officials, as districts needed to pay for closed school site upkeep and maintenance, demolition, moving services, new costs of transporting students, and services for both displaced students and the schools that received them. In essence, the cost savings are rarely realized.

School closings in Chicago have not necessarily aided taxpayers, instead, Farmer et al. (2013) found that they have primarily benefited charter school expansion as 40% of closed CPS school buildings have been leased to privately-managed charter schools. As might be expected, CReATE's analysis of Chicago enrollment data shows that school closures have perpetuated a cycle of neighborhood school closure and charter openings. In addition, CPS has relied on laying off veteran teachers and replacing them with alternatively certified teachers (i.e. Teach For America) under the guise of saving money (Brewer, 2016; Brewer, Kretchmar, Sondel, Ishmael, & Manfra, 2016). These alternatively certified teachers are often groomed specifically to teach in the charter schools that are replacing public schools (Edushyster, 2013).

Of note, there is research by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research that posits charter schools in Chicago have performed better than neighborhood public schools in the Windy City. Gwynne and Moore (2017) found that charter high school students had higher attendance, test scores and rates of college enrollment than similar students in non-charter high schools. However, the study notes that the population of charter schools in Chicago is quite different in two major ways relative to neighborhood public schools. First, the study found that charter high school students transferred out of their schools at higher rates and when compared to similar students in public high schools. The research literature has previously found that charters crop low-performing students which makes comparisons between charters and public high schools problematic (Vasquez Heilig, Williams, McNeil, & Lee, 2011; Welner, 2013). Also, the study found that there was a larger variation in success within charter schools than neighborhood public schools—which is an indication of wider variation in quality in the charter sector relative to public high schools.

Notably, a more recent study by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research identified problematic social and academic impacts from school closures. Gordon et al. (2018) found that the students moved to new schools created challenging "us" vs. "them" dynamics. The closures also impeded the "longstanding social connections that families and staff had with their schools and with one another, resulting in a period of mourning" (p. 4). The school closures also resulted in problematic learning effects for students that left closed schools as there was a long-term negative impact on math test scores and slightly lower and short-term

effects for reading test scores. Furthermore, students from closed schools experienced lower core GPAs as negative effects appeared in year three and four post-closure.

In summary, the predominance of research and data examining education reform in Chicago indicate that there are few financial savings, decreased student achievement, increased racial inequality, increased class size, and increased violence. Considering these outcomes, educators and community-based stakeholders have not remained silent in the face of this apparent injustice. In what follows, we examine teacher and community-based activism in Chicago situated against the local and broader reform efforts to which they fight against. We focus on strategies implemented by educator and community-based activists in response to the broader aims of school reforms, those specific to Chicago, and more broadly across the United States. We conclude by discussing the implications of the strategies that have been borne out of the activism in Chicago as well as across the country.

Chicago Teachers Develop Social Justice Framework

While the spring of 2018 saw a growing tide of teachers and support staff who were speaking out against the rising tide of privatization and other issues impacting the working conditions of educators (Goldstein, 2018a, 2018b; Goldstein & Burns, 2018), Chicago educators have organized and waged a concerted social justice framework for more than a decade to respond to the attacks on their work as professionals as well as the persistent attacks and cutbacks on financial support of schools and students.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, business interests seemed to have more and more control over the classroom, educators found themselves with few allies and politically isolated (Weiner, 2011). The movement from business unionism to social justice unionism is a reaction to these outside forces. The definition of social justice unionism for this paper derives from research from a combination of viewpoints in the field of union scholarship (Anyon, 2005; Peterson & Charney, 1999). A union follows a social justice framework if the following principles are intact: (1) there is a commitment to defending public education as a right for all children; (2) the organization upholds the rights of all educators—not just classroom teachers—as workers seeking improved conditions for both children and adults; and (3) in order to fulfill the definition of a social justice framework, an organization demonstrates a commitment to defending the rights of children and acknowledge a partnership with the communities where students live. In order to accomplish these standards, the organization uses a democratic process where rank-and-file participation is encouraged and upheld.

An analysis of social justice unionism is of utmost importance to educators who are no longer willing to have education reform and the privatization of education occur while unions stand by or, even worse, participate in these reforms. Teachers see the co-opting of terms such as “achievement gap” and “accountability” to justify harsh and devastating measures taken against schools, communities, teachers, and children. The movement towards social justice unionism is growing. It is the hope of many teachers, through the structure and power of their unions, to regain power and to once again be invited to the table in forming education policies that affect their lives and the learning of their students. In order to do this, groups of teachers are working toward regaining the transformation of large urban unions toward social justice. One of these groups originated in Chicago in 2008 as a caucus with a social justice framework, the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE). CORE is of particular interest because it is one

of the first social justice caucuses to gain control of a large urban district that also waged a successful strike action.

Building CORE

Several influential Chicago teachers recognized in 2008 that school closings were going unnoticed and unchallenged. They realized that students were being torn from their communities, and they saw veteran, skilled teachers being fired. Jackson Potter (2009), one of the CORE founders, worked at Englewood High School which was slated to close. He relayed his school was labeled as a “culture of failure.” Instead of failure Potter believed he was witnessing a systematic marginalization and neglect of a community. As the union delegate for Englewood High School he asked the union for help and was told that he should “look for another job.” At a closed hearing, Marilyn Stewart, then president of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), told Potter to sit down and not make a fuss. This was a culminating moment when Potter realized his union was not going to fight the privatization and private control of Chicago schools, and that he would need to find others to confront the inequities of school closings and arbitrary veteran teacher job loss.

Potter gathered other like-minded teachers together and they began studying the effects of education reform. In May of 2008, the working group came together at the United Electricians’ Hall to develop a strategic plan to defend public education and send the CTU in a new direction. The group decided to continue meeting on a regular basis over the next six months. In the end, these education activists decided that forming a new union caucus was the best method for promoting their social justice vision. This was the genesis of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE).

In addition to school closings, CORE members were concerned with the proliferation of charter schools. Charter schools were draining student enrollment from neighborhood schools and were impacting the educators because charters at that time were not unionized. The members of CORE realized that there was a link between privatization, gentrification, and the loss of neighborhood schools. “We (CORE) worked with community groups to show that students and families were being pushed out of neighborhoods by the double whammy of developers and school closings” (Shibata, 2010). Hence, the origin of CORE is based in social justice—fighting for and alongside marginalized groups who are oppressed by power structures, including students, workers, and communities. CORE also developed a political platform based on the effects of school closings on neighborhoods, privatization of public schools, and workplace justice for displaced educators.

From the onset, the founders of CORE were adamant that their caucus be much more than an election campaign for control of the CTU. They were focused on fighting for the education that children in Chicago deserve and for the rights of educators. The group was convinced that the only way to successfully obtain these goals was to establish a democratic process and a member-driven union. In fact, a CORE document states,

CORE believes ultimate Union power and authority rest in the members themselves. Teachers and PSRP’s (Paraprofessionals and School Related Personnel) must be the union’s driving force—we must take back our union, redefine its values, leadership

structure, and direction. All elected leaders must be true servants of the entire CTU membership. (Caucus of Rank and File Educators, 2010)

Yet, the greatest driving force for the caucus was educational equity for students. Karen Lewis, then CORE president, often said that educators needed to find issues that “unite us, give us strength, and build our power” (Lewis, 2013). The inequities inherent in the Chicago Public Schools, especially in terms of resource allocation, school funding, class, and race, served all three uniting purposes. After months of learning, discussing, and thinking together, CORE developed its statement of purpose and five basic principles. The statement of purpose said, “We plan to democratize the Chicago Teachers’ Union and turn it into an organization that fights on behalf of its members and the students we educate” (CORE, n.d.). To accomplish that end the CORE leadership realized that they needed to take control of the union and advocate for a strong contract agreement that reaffirmed these principles. A new, sturdier contract would be necessary to enforce the social justice vision of this caucus to “ensure the working conditions and compensation provide for optimal teacher and learning,” and getting that contract was only possible with full control of CTU.

One of the qualities that distinguished CORE as a caucus from other union organizations was its ability incorporate other educators and community members with a commitment to taking action. CORE members went to school closing hearings, charter school openings, and board meetings. Speaking about CORE presence at Board of Education meetings Karen Lewis stated, “We made it so every single month our voices, CORE voices, became a visible presence” (Peterson & Sokolower, 2010, p. 1). CORE also lobbied the state legislature for a moratorium on school closings. And together with the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM), CORE activists organized massive rallies against the Board of Education including a tent city campout (Caucus of Rank and File Educators, 2011). With each successive action the membership of the caucus grew and took form. As a result, the CORE case demonstrates how taking direct action in service of marginalized communities is a distinguishing factor in social justice unionism. As a result, CORE’s mission of social justice began to unite a community-based education reform coalition across Chicago.

Lois Weiner stated that a socially just union struggles for its members’ stake in creating a more democratic, equitable society, and the union allies itself with other movements that are working for social justice, peace, and equity (Weiner, 2012). Believing that the Chicago education reforms were affecting many stakeholders besides teachers, CORE continued to reach out to a large network. Chief among these groups were Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE), Designs for Change, and the Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization (KOCO). Norine Gutekanst, who served on the CORE steering committee, said, “We worked with community groups to show that students and families were being pushed out of neighborhoods by the double whammy of developers and school closings” (Shibata, 2010, p. 1). In January of 2009, the foundational group of CORE organized an education summit where allies from around the city were invited to form strategy and cohesion. The day of the summit produced a record Chicago snowstorm, but in spite of the weather 500 people attended from 80 schools and over a dozen community groups (Shibata, 2010). The social justice mission of CORE was attracting teachers, parents, and concerned community members. In fact, Linda Lenz from Catalyst magazine stated, “CORE is amassing people power, something it has done well from the start” (Lenz, 2010).

CORE won leadership of the CTU when Karen Lewis was elected President after a run-off election against incumbent Marilyn Stewart in the spring of 2010. To develop a presence of educator voice in union activity, the new leadership went on a yearlong listening tour. Karen Lewis relayed, “One thing we did was get and use data. We asked people, ‘What do you think? What do you want?’” (Sokolower, 2012-2013, p. 2). The union found that its membership had a deep commitment to addressing a variety of issues affecting Chicago schools. These problematic issues included: unmanageable class sizes, a lack of wrap-around services such as nurses, psychologists, and social workers to address the extensive problems of students living in poverty; the absence of art, music, foreign language, and physical education programs; and 90 schools without playgrounds and 140 schools without libraries. CTU published a research document entitled *The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve* (Caref & Jankov, 2012) that outlined the vast unmet needs in the city’s schools as well as the union’s vision for what schools should be. Educators and community members were galvanized by the results of this research, and it became a centerpiece in the community-based social justice fight for Chicago schools.

During the following school year, 2011-2012, the union leadership and organizers created contract action committees in every school (Sokolower, 2012-2013). Teachers were asked to take part in simple actions, such as wearing red on Fridays. Some teachers held public grade-ins where teachers would grade papers in public in order to build awareness around the number of hours teachers were spending on their jobs. Additional actions were also planned such as parent and community dinners, teacher in the pulpit (a program where teachers volunteer to speak in faith communities), and informational picketing. Many schools sought to build their grassroots power by creating one positive action per month to buttress support among fellow educators and the community (Gunderson, 2013).

The culminating experience for many of the teachers who were working to form educator and community solidarity throughout the school year was a rally at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago on May 23, 2013. Four thousand educators gathered to hear speeches, sing, and chant inside the walls of one of the union’s most honored places—echoing a rally in the same auditorium that was central in the Chicago teacher actions of the 1960s. After the indoor event, the 4,000 in the Auditorium joined the 2,000 educators and community members on the street as 6,000 Chicagoans marched down Michigan Avenue on behalf of education justice (Gunderson, 2013).

Chicago Teachers Strike of 2012

For 11 months, the CTU negotiated in good faith with the Board of Education for the Chicago Public Schools. During that time, much progress was made. The CTU was able to hold off merit pay attached to test scores—a fad which many other large urban districts had already capitulated (Stewart, 2011). Chicago schools were given 500 new positions to add art, music, or physical education to a longer school day, and principals were directed to draw these candidates from a pool of previously displaced teachers. This was the first recall language that Chicago teachers had received since 1995. The union thought that it had gained enough momentum and goodwill to be taken seriously by the Board of Education and the Mayor. Yet, when the contract expired on June 30, 2012, there were many unresolved issues.

The teachers assured the public and community that their first choice was not to go on strike. They assumed Mayor Emanuel would do everything he could to settle it before a strike.

The educators were receiving pressure not to strike from politicians and advocacy organizations. But all along, they were very open about their priorities and their willingness to strike to achieve them (Sokolower, 2012-2013, p. 2). In September of 2012, after negotiations broke down, a strike was called. The strike lasted for seven days, and during that time teachers rallied in public venues across Chicago. For example, it was estimated that a rally downtown on the first day of the strike drew 30,000 people (Lewis, 2013). The amount of solidarity was unprecedented. The Chicago educators had the support of many other city unions during the strike—police, fire, labor—all joined. CTU estimated that less than 2% of workers crossed the picket line. Karen Lewis said the strike “has awakened a lot of labor unions to what solidarity looks like, what it means” (Sokolower, 2012-2013, p. 4).

The 2012 strike was just the beginning of a fight for education justice in Chicago. In March of 2013, the Board of Education announced the proposed closings of 54 schools and restructuring (also called turnaround) actions in six additional schools. This would have been the largest number of school actions any district has ever undertaken in the United States. Most of the schools that were slated for closure were in West and South Side neighborhoods, which serve primarily poor Black and Latinx families. President Karen Lewis addressed these new challenges in her State of the Union Address to the CTU House of Delegates on January 9, 2012. She stressed the need for the union to focus the conversation during the strike. She said, “Brothers and sisters, we must force the discussion about poverty every time they want to force the discussion about school reform” (Lewis, 2013). After seven days on the picket lines, 26,000 Chicago teachers went back to the classroom with a new contract and clear purpose (Ashby & Bruno, 2016).

Moving Chicago Forward

The advancement of teaching as a profession, teacher training, and health care reform are all progressive issues that unions have addressed over the years. Yet, in the current state of education, this is not enough. Educators are decrying an erosion of public education with the proliferation of charters, teachers arbitrarily losing their jobs in turnaround schools, and the purposeful under-resourcing of schools in urban centers. These conditions are primarily found in poor, urban neighborhood where students and communities have limited political power to fight these top-down, private-control education reform policies. In order to continue relevance in today’s education climate, educators need to use the structure and power of their unions to pursue educational opportunities and justice for communities.

Speaking to the CTU House of Delegates, a body of 800 democratically elected educators, President Karen Lewis addressed the social justice framework of the union.

So what was the catalyst for our tremendous transformation—from a do nothing union to a do something union? What moved us from a place of fear and complacency into becoming the leading voices in these United States in the forefront fighting against misguided education reform? How did that happen? (Lewis, 2013, p. 5)

She continued to explain that it came from educators who believe in justice. As Lois Weiner says in her book, *The Future of Our Schools*, “If you care about social justice in education, you

have a very important stake in not only the continued existence of teacher's unions but also in their transformation" (Weiner, 2011, p. 12).

Creating Community Coalitions in the Era of Donald Trump

In 2007, Dr. Pauline Lipman, a University of Illinois at Chicago professor, in conjunction with the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) publicly released a study entitled "Students as Collateral Damage: A Preliminary Study of Renaissance 2010 School Closings in the Midsouth" that tracked the impact of school closings on Chicago's South Side. The study relayed that 90 percent of the children affected by the Renaissance 2010 plan school closings were Black and the majority were from low-income families (Lipman and Person, 2007). The study also found that the school closings had led to a disruption of teaching and learning climate, problems with safety and discipline, and that educators felt they were "set up for failure" due to declining resources. The study also revealed a lack of consultation with the school community and a disregard for their knowledge and input. This seminal collaboration is credited by community organizers as one of the inspiration points for CORE and the successive community-based campaigns organizing against the privatization and private control of public education in Chicago. Despite community organizing and protest from teachers, community organizers, and other education stakeholders—private control and privatization of public schools continued to gain public policy momentum in Chicago and elsewhere for the next decade. The growth of the power of education reformers culminated with the nomination of Betsy DeVos, one of the nation's biggest proponents and financiers of market-based school choice, being nominated for United State Secretary of Education by Donald Trump.

Despite the resounding voices of millions of Americans, as well as parents and students who rejected the failed privatization agenda of Betsy DeVos in Detroit (which she advocated for and bankrolled), the United States Senate confirmed Betsy Devos as education secretary. For the first time in U.S. history, the Vice President had to cast the deciding vote, breaking a 50/50 tie. The reason this unprecedented historic action was required was likely due to the determination of millions of Americans who opposed DeVos' confirmation, and the organizing of national networks such as the Journey for Justice Alliance, the Network for Public Education, the Badass Teacher's Association, the Alliance to Reclaim our Schools, NAACP, and many others speaking out about DeVos' support of the private control and privatization of education. Forcing a historic deciding vote by the Vice President was a culmination of years of organization towards building a multi-racial, grassroots movement for education justice in this country. After the DeVos confirmation, campaigns were organized in 35 cities across the United States, to build grassroots strength to resist the administration's privatization policies and most importantly, advance the vision for equity in public education. Community-based organizers are working to reject privatization and private-control focused education interventions and demand equity for all students (Brown, 2017).

Community activists do not view education privatization and community control as a partisan issue (Vasquez Heilig & Clark, 2018). On April 18, 2018, in several cities across the United States students, parents and educators lifted their voices in a collective rejection of school privatization. The #WeChoose campaign seeks to hold elected Republican and Democratic policymakers accountable to advance an equity-centered education platform and is endorsed by hundreds of thousands of parents and students across the country. As discussed above

in the Chicago case, the Democratic and Republican parties have both played a role in buttressing the privatization and private control of education. For example, even though Donald Trump has promised in his campaign to spend \$20 billion on school choice policies, he didn't close 50 schools in Chicago and fail to improve the education of Black and Brown children—it was Mayor Rahm Emanuel. It was not a right-wing Republican who implemented Race to the Top on states and cities, ignoring savage inequities in public education to promote school privatization—it was Arne Duncan, President Obama's Secretary of Education.

Community-based activists have called upon education reforms to refocus on inequality rather than privatization and private-control of education. They are seeking to move the discourse concretely from choice to equity. They are asking questions such as: Why does one child have the opportunity to learn a world language and the other does not? Why does one school have debate teams, robotics clubs, social emotional support and the other does not? Separate and unequal education is about access to resources and opportunity, not how many different schools are available. Most policymakers in the United State have refused to stand firm on the equity issue, critique structural and institutional racism, or advocate for the right for low income families to be treated with dignity and provided educational opportunity.

Community-based organizing efforts to focus on equity instead of choice are growing. There are over 8 million people represented by the platform promoted by the #WeChoose coalition; a moratorium on school privatization, 10,000 sustainable community schools, an end to zero tolerance policies; a national equity assessment of public education in the U.S.; to stop the attack on teachers of color; to end state takeovers and appointed school boards and mayoral control; and finally, limit the over-reliance on standardized testing in public schools. Activists are also seeking to address the strategy that education reformers have traditionally used—which is to pit neighborhood public school parents against charter school parents. They believe that parents and communities should not be adversaries in the privatization and private-control of public education debate.

The #WeChoose campaign is organizing to advance a progressive public education agenda in cities across the United States to inform and build momentum for a national consensus to end school privatization and support sustainable, community schools as a remedy for America's struggling schools. In July of 2018, the Journey for Justice coalition launched a series of "Critical Conversation Townhalls" across the United States to unite communities to fight for equity in public education and to defeat privatization (vouchers and charter expansion) initiatives that will be pushed by Betsy DeVos—and, if history is an indicator—also supported by elected officials from both major political parties (Vasquez Heilig, 2013).

The #WeChoose campaign is successfully engaging people power in social media and in person on the ground to defend children against the privatization and private-control of public education. Community stakeholders in Chicago and other large cities have won sustainable community schools as an alternative to privatization, stopped school closings, elected progressive school board members, led a revolt against standardized testing, and organized boycotts to pressure privatizers to stop closing schools. #WeChoose continues to organize in cities across the United States to build the political will to advance a community-based education agenda focused on equity and not the illusion of school choice that they argue is disingenuously promoted by the supporters of privatization and private-control of public education. The

#WeChoose coalition and its partners proffer that the United States is shortchanging communities of color and that the nation's children deserve equal education opportunities offered by community-based education reform.

Conclusion

The United States has not yet realized the 1954 mandate of *Brown v. Board* to address deep-seated education inequity. Today, more than 60 years later, schools are still profoundly separate and unequal based on race and class. The failure extends to disparities across the spectrum of education including curriculum, access to programs and technology, how school discipline is administered and funding. It is problematic that the state-sanctioned sabotage of human potential is readily apparent in communities across the United States such as Chicago. These issues are being amplified by the school privatization movement, which #WeChoose campaign has called the illusion of school choice.

As we have discussed, the trend towards private control of public schools under mayoral control is clear in Chicago. However, Chicago is not the only place in the United States where privatization and private control has had a purposefully inequitable treatment for communities of color. For example, in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, nearly every public school in the system was closed and converted to a charter school. Comparing the experience of St. Bernard Parish and their neighbor, New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward after Katrina is a case in point of purposeful structural inequity as both areas were ravaged by the hurricane. The major difference between the areas is that St. Bernard's Parish is nearly 72% White and the Lower 9th Ward is 96% Black. The White residents in St. Bernard's suffered greatly, evidenced by 15 schools damaged, many beyond repair (Thompson, 2015). To date, 12 of the 15 schools have been completely rebuilt including a state-of-the-art K-12 complex, *less than 200 yards* from the Lower 9th Ward. In the primarily Black Lower 9th Ward only one school, Martin Luther King High School, has been completely rebuilt and was forced to reopen as a charter school. More than a decade later, Lower 9th Ward students still go to school in trailers or are forced to catch buses very early in the morning to charter schools outside of their neighborhood because most parts of the Ward are still educational deserts. The inequity in the education "reform" approach for neighborhoods relative to race and class noted in Chicago and New Orleans has also occurred in Detroit, Memphis, DC, Oakland and many other cities (Vasquez Heilig, Nelson, & Kronzer, 2018).

In conclusion, Jitu Brown attended a student assembly at Mollison in 2014 some six months after they received 200 children from a recently closed school from a nearby Chicago neighborhood. As he walked into the gymnasium a group of more than 30 second and third graders ran up to him and pulled on his pants leg and asked: "Mr. Jitu, are they going to open my school again? Are we going back to Overton? Please?" All he could do was hug these children as they mourned and tell them, "No, but we are going to do our best to make you happy at Mollison." For those students and families there is no neighborhood school choice. The choice of an equally-resourced, neighborhood public school was ironically taken from them in their name. As we have discussed, educators and community-based stakeholder are actively engaged in stemming the tide of privatization and private-control in Chicago and elsewhere. However, the important work of transforming education and empowering community-based

engagement and support for public schools requires that this country to choose equity, not the illusion of privatized and privately-controlled school choice in Chicago and elsewhere.

Indeed, while there are many successes, public education still needs improvement—especially to remedy the severe inequities that persist (Vasquez Heilig, Brewer, & Adamson, in press). Sixty years after *Brown v. Board*, education is still very separate and unequal. Despite decades of school choice policies and education privatization, White students still have priority access to curriculum, programming, technology and other resources that foster educational environments. Black and Brown communities are being denied those same opportunities and they are in many cities subjected to narrowed curriculum (Brown, Vasquez Heilig, & Brown, 2013) and the onus of improving “failing” schools (Hamilton, Vasquez Heilig, & Pazey, 2013). But, there is hope for change. Hope remains in empowerment—in the ability to organize communities of educators and other public education stakeholders to truly advocate for students rather than profit.

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