

Neoliberalism, Corporate Interests, and Philanthropy in U.S. Education Reform: A Case Study of a Faux Grassroots Education Reform Organization

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Abstract

Philanthropy and big money have served as a primary means of intervention in nearly all facets of United States society, including education. We find that scholarship focusing on philanthropy and education reform lacks necessary detail and fundamental research on tangible implications. Even with these holes, however, there exists friction between those that view big money investments in education reform as well-intentioned versus those that see it as a means to destroy the public education system. Despite these conflicting narratives, it is clear that rampant, unchecked philanthropy in the U.S. has resulted in the promotion of corporate, neoliberal interests that ultimately undermine the needs and power of communities they claim to help. In this paper, we offer a literature review and case study to interrogate the role of philanthropy in the U.S. education reform landscape. First, we explore the debate on the intentions and implications of philanthropy in education. Then, we detail the corporate and neoliberal agendas in education policy and organizing. Finally, we build on this thorough analysis by conducting a case study on Students for Education Reform (SFER)—presently known as Our Turn; ultimately exposing faux grassroots education reform organizing.

Literature Review

The Roots and Arguable Implications of Big Money Interventions in Education

The extensive influence of big money in education can be traced all the way to the birth of the United States public education system. Even though Rooks (2017) interrogates this within the specific context of Black education and white philanthropy, her analysis of the role of big money in shaping public education offers a generative framework for understanding the contemporary scope of philanthropy in education. She highlights

rooted ideals of social efficiency that caused investments in Black education to be viewed primarily in terms of national economic benefits. These seemingly benevolent initiatives only served to feed off of racialized fears that Black inferiority would ultimately hold the nation back. For example, the then-president of the University of Tennessee, Charles Dabney, advocated for both Black and white children to receive free public education in the south, otherwise, he believed that the uneducated “negro” would “drag them down”(Rooks, 2017, p.57). As Rooks analyzes these pasts through a critical lens, she offers a historical context that points to the incentives and rhetoric used by neoliberal actors in education today.

These early histories reflect the roots and modern-day impacts of large-scale, big-money agents on policy and education. Through a quantitative investigation of the fifteen largest foundations, and their spending patterns from 2000, 2005, and 2010, Reckhow and Snyder (2014) highlight the increased influence of mega-foundations in the education policy sector, particularly in their funding of national-level advocacy organizations (p. 193). The authors propose two concepts to track institutional change: “convergent grantmaking” and “juridical challengers.” Convergent grantmaking is an increasingly popular practice among foundations where they fund similar organizations and institutions to advance a certain policy agenda. The findings of Reckhow and Snyder (2014) highlight philanthropic enthusiasm to utilize convergent grantmaking with organizations that primarily challenge public institutions—these organizations are called juridical challengers (p. 193). The literature highlights the increased influence of philanthropy in education over the years as a result of growing grantee networks created through convergent grantmaking for prominent challengers like charter systems and alternate teacher accreditation programs.

Although this analysis does reject the notion that these foundations are engaging in autonomous charity for mere patronage, it does not formulate conclusions on the impact of these strategies on the traditional schooling system and those who are left in it. Focusing more specifically on the methodology through which philanthropic interventions aim to progress specific agendas, Ferris (2006) claims that the approaches of philanthropy and big money rely on trickle-down effects for large scale systemic changes (p.728). For example, this can be seen in direct attempts to use resources to change the behavior of educators with the hope that this better the achievement of students and ultimately institutionalizes improved practices (p. 728). These understandings of resources as capable of making institution-level impacts represent the modern-day approaches that big money interventions attempt in the name of reform efforts.

Despite these basic alignments in our understanding of philanthropic approaches, there exists a polarized discourse on what the impacts of big money are on the education system and those who rely most on it. Though very minimal and with many holes, literature that emphasizes the benefits

of funneling big money into the education system revolves around the formulation of individualized, well-intended, and intentional solutions. Hess (2005) combines different texts to convey the well-intentioned nature of philanthropy, arguing that it is essential for reform in its attempts to better the public education system. To validate the implications of philanthropy, Hess includes Lenkowsky's arguments that both historical and modern-day philanthropy always adheres to five intentions: "to create better schools, create better teachers, create better curricula, create better communities, and create better children"—ultimately, extending profound benevolence (Hess, p. 14). Similarly, Jenkins and McAdams (2005) analyze the positive implications of philanthropy on reforming urban school districts, such as increasing professional development in Houston (p. 149). In response to the cases that seemingly failed to reap these benefits, however, they say it was the environment that prevented reform because, for example, "local conditions in San Diego ultimately thwarted philanthropy's best intentions" (Jenkins & McAdams, 2005, p. 153). Furthering these positive perspectives of philanthropy, Ferris et. al (2008) applaud the incredible level of caution and incremental methodology that foundations take when attempting to make changes to the education system—which is said to be shown through projects, funding research, and development activities (p. 705). It is even implied that through this intentional approach, foundations center the community by working directly with those who are likely to impact (Ferris et. al, 2008, p. 725). When these literatures argue that philanthropic interventions are always well-intentioned, have meticulous methodologies, and work to center the community, big money is honorably applauded.

In contrast to the literature that regards big money interventions as positive, there are complex arguments that explicitly denounce philanthropy for being exploitative and self-serving. More generally, Webber (2020) makes clear the dangers of rhetoric that applauds the efforts of philanthropy as it creates a savior complex that blames the community for circumstances and "declares philanthropists the only reformers whose commitments to educational civil rights remain uncompromised by political-economic self-interest" (p. 293). Here, Webber voices the dangers of excluding those most impacted when external players dive into fixing communities that they know little about. In this case, philanthropists can be seen intentionally acting to promote their own vision of education, which ultimately serves their "political-economic self-interest" and disregards students, teachers and communities. Further rejecting the flowery rhetoric used to describe seemingly progressive philanthropy, Rooks (2017) bluntly attacks the exploitation that is made possible by corporate interests in education. She coins the term "segrenomics", which is defined as the profiting of corporations and the private sector on school segregation, to explain how corporate school choice movements rely on impoverished schools of Black and Brown children to ultimately destroy the public education

system and produce more inequality (Rooks, 2017, p. 2). Also critiquing the exploitative possibilities of philanthropy, Au & Ferrare (2015) affirm that foundations are powerful players that act as forms of governance by monopolizing power while lacking any oversight (p. 10). They highlight this about the Gates Foundation's tremendous power in shaping education policy without any public accountability (p. 10). This extensive power, much like how Rooks points out, is tremendously capable of being abused—a modern reality that scholars in literature have only begun to uncover and denounce.

Corporate Interests and Neoliberalism in Education Reform

This offers a peek into a greater field of critique that links corporate interests within philanthropy to neoliberalism in education reform. In *Plutocrats at Work*, Barkan (2013) argues that mega-foundations ultimately have unparalleled autonomy and agency in operating without much obligation to the communities they work in. Through "venture philanthropy" or "philanthrocapitalism," foundations operate using a top-down model driven by "return on investment, strategic giving, [and] grantee accountability" (p. 639). An analysis of this concept leads Barkan (2013) to conclude that business-driven philanthropic involvements in education reform are inherently plutocratic and undermine the public's democracy. This is unlike other quantitative research on philanthropy that merely detail the activity of foundations and remain neutral on their consequences. This departure is mirrored by Scott (2009) who interrogates the role of big money in progressing neoliberalism in education. Adding to Barkan's concept of "venture philanthropy," he argues that it is a particularly aggressive approach created to remedy limited philanthropic outputs, especially following frustration with the seemingly slow growth of charter schools (Scott, 2009). The literature further explicates the alignment of venture philanthropic efforts with the privatization of education, school choice, and charter expansion (108). Au & Ferrare (2015) would regard this as corporate education reform, which they define as the diversion of funding from public education, the dismantling of unions, transformation of public education access into a free-market competition, and the use of competitive, high stakes testing and evaluation (p. 8). These practices consistently show up in literature and will be explored extensively in the upcoming sections and case study in this paper. Ultimately, the emphasis of aggressive forms of philanthropy in literature broadly highlights arguments that heavily denounce the corporate interests of big money when single-handedly intervening in education reform.

Neoliberal Education Reform Policy

Through an investigative and critical approach, researchers have studied historic education reform policies in U.S. history to highlight the role that

big money has on schooling. Beauchamp (2014) details a common formula adopted by mega-foundations pushing for educational reforms where they “insist that America has an educational crisis that, if solved, would also help to eradicate economic disparity (rather than admitting what we actually have, which is an economic crisis causing educational disparity).” Much like the “jurisdictional challengers” detailed by Reckhow and Snyder (2014), Beauchamp argues that foundations use their formula to diminish the efforts and capability of civic and public institutions to advance their free-market solutions without much accountability, financial transparency and oversight. This frustration is echoed in other literature that explores philanthropic involvement in education reform policies in U.S education.

In a critique of the neoliberal agendas in education policy, researchers claim that the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind policy inherently emerged from a capitalist outlook on school inequities that ultimately sought to create competition among schools for federal funding (Barkan, 2013; Beauchamp, 2014; Lipman, 2007). This is further explored in research by long-time author and professor of critical education theory, Wayne Au who co-authored literature focused on the source and impact of some education reform in US education beginning with NCLB initiatives. In addition to the business-driven agendas in the policy, its foundation is unquestionably tied with corporate interests: Nine recommendations put out by the Business Roundtable, a group of corporate CEOs from the largest 218 corporations, were all included in the NCLP agenda (Au & Hollar, 2016). By highlighting that the policy was a collaborative project between corporate leaders, the authors emphasize that it ultimately “codified the neoliberalization of education policy” through high-stakes testing and punitive evaluation systems—schools turned into other business modeled sectors in which competition and efficiency were championed (Au & Hollar, 2016). This initiative ignored the structural barriers facing students and teachers and instead was founded on the neoliberal desire to make an educational marketplace with consumers and competing products (Au & Hollar, 2016).

Adding to criticism of NCLB, Klein (2015) details the lack of focus on structural inequities and the prevalence of unrealistic and extremely ambitious goals set by punitive accountability measures. The literature goes on to explore the priorities of Race to the Top (RTTT) grant competition and NCLB waivers which were established by the Obama administration to “allow states to get out from under many of the mandates of the NCLB law in exchange for embracing certain education redesign priorities” (Klein, 2015). Some of these priorities included incentivizing states to ensure teacher evaluations based on student progress, selection of 15% of schools for turnaround strategies, and the use of Common Core State Standard (Klein, 2015). Literature on the Common Core State Standard, pushed extensively by the administration, illustrates the significant role that foundations, particularly the Gates foundation, played

in its creation and implementation (Au & Hollar, 2016; Barkan, 2013; Strauss, 2013, Beauchamp, 2014). To support the claim that “RTTT explicitly rewarded applicants for implementing market-based education reform,” Au and Hollar (2016, p. 33) use the Common Core as a case study and show the intimate links between neoliberal reform and US federal education policy. It is learned that the original working group that formulated the standards was staffed with multiple testing agency experts and employees of school choice programs; only one K-12 teacher was included.

Furthermore, the literature emphasizes the significant role that the Gates Foundation played in the implementation of the standards, through partnerships with testing agencies and in paying \$233 million to garner research in support of the agenda (Au & Hollar, 2016). Beyond this, Au and Hollar (2016) argue that entities like the Department of Education and other executives spearheading the RTTT grants were close affiliates of the Gates Foundation and its former employees. Although these initiatives have been replaced by the current education policy, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), many are frustrated by the lack of focus on remedying the impact of high stakes testing and the devaluation of public schools (Klein, 2015; Au & Hollar, 2016). Ultimately, there is a trend regarding the influence of venture philanthropy in the creation and adoption of neoliberal reforms that come with “strings attached... [and are] directly aligned with the corporate drive to privatize public education” (Au & Hollar, 2016, p. 33).

The critique of corporate influence in neoliberal education policy initiatives is paired with an analysis of its administration and impact on the inherent structure of school. Here, Au & Hollar (2016) make an effort to fill in gaps in scholarship which is heavily focused on the broad federal consequences of initiatives like NCLB and RTTT. For example, work done by historian Larry Cuban explores the capitalist and business language that now dominates school board positions. This can be seen through the use of “performance clauses in superintendents’ contracts” and normalized language that render schools businesses with consumers and competition (Au & Hollar, 2016, p. 31). Furthermore, the literature brings to light the increased outsourcing of services to private firms by school districts, even “in some cases, [the outsourcing] of entire schools” (Au & Hollar, 2016, p. 33). As a result, security and maintenance of school buildings and administrative operations are carried out by outside entities.

These systematic changes that result from a neoliberal framework within education policy can also be seen in case studies from Barkan (2013). She explores “privately funded public employees” who work in school districts in order to advance neoliberal standards and ensure their implementation. This work examines three case studies, including the New Jersey state department of education and officials in DC and LA school districts. In the instance of DC and LA schools, Barkan (2013)

concluded that foundations such as Walton, Broad, Robertson, and Arnold hired and financed officials who overlooked reform projects focused on teacher evaluations and data collection, raising questions of transparency and private interests. In their \$430,000 contract with the New Jersey state board of education, the Broad foundation “secretly stipulated...that Governor Christie remain in office,” while the board ensured a 50% increase in the number of charter schools in the state (Barkan, 2013, p. 648). These case studies support researchers and reporters who have continually critiqued the neoliberal framework through which foundations operate in the education sector.

Moreover, Ravitch (2020) explores the privatization of schooling by focusing on the failure of charter and voucher programs in Nevada, Ohio, New Orleans, and Milwaukee to highlight the lack of focus on structural determinants of school inequity (Ravitch, 2020). Calling neoliberal advocates “disruptors”, Ravitch (2020) mirrors the rhetoric around “jurisdictional challengers” introduced earlier in this review (Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Beauchamp, 2014). Building on criticism around school choice initiatives that are championed by turnaround strategies detailed in NCLB and RTTT, Strauss (2013) highlights the disproportionate impact these market-based reforms have on Black and Brown students. Following RTTT school closures in Chicago and Philadelphia, in addition to the push for EdTech companies to replace traditional schools across the country (with particular focus on Jeb Bush’s the Foundation for Excellence in Education [FEE]), the most marginalized students became collateral to corporate efforts. These initiatives merely focused on “the rapid scaling up of a competitive parallel system of charter schools” and disregarded the needs of students (Strauss, 2013). She concludes her work with a call for those who are “still considering themselves to be allied with the noble cause of ‘education reform’ [to] either drop the pretension of being ‘for students’ and civil rights”, or pause to consider “whose side [they] are on” (Strauss, 2013).

Education Reform Organizing

In tandem with research that highlights the gradual shift to outcome-oriented strategies by big philanthropy, is an emerging literature dedicated to understanding the tactics they use to make these initiatives ‘stick’. For instance, Barkan (2013) introduces the use of “Astroturfing” by foundations to garner support for their desired policy initiatives. He defines this practice as one where foundations begin “funding outside groups to set up ‘local’ nonprofits with paid staff to push ed-reform” (Barkan, 2013). Researchers emphasize that well-financed astroturfing suffocates authentic grassroots activity by defining an issue and occupying the space for organizing with plentiful resources (p. 642).

Given that these practices are plainly depicted in tremendously influential foundations, Barkan (2013) was able to analyze leaked reports and PR proposals from the Gates Foundation. Au & Ferrare (2015) also

critique the Gates foundation for having goals related to “advancing policies guided by free-market assumptions” and “prioritizing the funding of organizations and projects in line with a neoliberal policy agenda” (p. 9). Barkan’s research (2013) reveals the Gates Foundation’s use of astroturfing to “generate grassroots support and favorable media coverage for their reforms”, particularly through their teacher effectiveness campaign and support for turnaround strategies. For the Gates Foundation to establish a democratic element to their teacher effectiveness campaign, it spent \$3.5 million to create a fake nonprofit grassroots organization, “Teaching First”, which eventually got renamed to “Communities for Teaching Excellence” (p. 642). Although the organization ultimately failed to garner support for controversial local policies, the four targeted cities were designated as potential investment sites for Gates to spend “\$335 million to try out its reforms” demonstrates the kind of coordination that undermines authentic organizing (p. 642). Despite this failure, other mega-foundations and Gates were “funding many other nonprofits to send paid staff around the country to start ed-reform campaigns” (p. 643).

Similar tactics can be seen by an Astroturf organization that was created by the Green Dot charter company and received \$14.8 million, almost all of it coming from mega-foundations like Walton (43% of their funding), Gates, Arnold, and Broad foundations (Barkan, 2013). Named “Parent Revolution,” the Astroturf lobbied for and sought to implement parent trigger laws which gave parents control over the fate of their children’s school. The law mandates that a petition signed by at least 50% of the parents to initiate a school trigger plan can determine whether it would be shut down, replaced by a charter, or have its staff and principal replaced (p. 644). Barkan (2013) emphasizes that “the concept was immediately controversial [as] one-half of the parents can completely disempower the other half,” before detailing the tactics adopted by Parent Revolution to initiate these triggers themselves through hired canvassers. They targeted schools like two predominantly Black and Brown schools in California: McKinley Elementary School and Desert Trails Elementary School (p. 645). Eventually, parents rescinded their signatures at both schools after realizing that representatives from the organization who sought to push for the adoption of partner character models tricked them into supporting them. By sharing reporting done by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Gary Cohen on the upheaval that followed these parent triggers, Barkan (2013) exposes the bizarre and insidious work done by mega-foundations to garner seemingly grassroots support for their work.

A Case Study: Students for Education Reform (SFER)

Corporate interests in education reform organizing are a severe source of critique that can be directly seen in extensive pieces of literature addressing Students for Education Reform (SFER). Currently going by the name “Our Turn”, SFER continues to operate in the education landscapes

of: Los Angeles, Charlotte, Denver and Minneapolis. Serving as a case study into neoliberal and philanthropic influences on education reform organizing, the organization was once described by Alexis Morin (2017), the co-founder, as a youth-led grassroots education reform organization that builds a diverse coalition of students “trained in advocacy and organizing” so that they are equipped to demand change. Founding the organization as a Princeton student and an alum of an academically rigorous school district, many of SFER’s rooted concerns related to student voice and the quality of teachers (Morin, 2017). However, SFER advocacy, informed by different experiences of students in the education system, later expanded to include, for example, demanding protections for undocumented students and denouncing School Resource Officers in schools.

Countering these positive depictions of SFER, Rooks (2017) emphasizes the role of big philanthropy and corporate stakeholders that fund SFER, especially in its early stages of formation. Closely associated with Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), Education Reform Now (ERN) gave SFER \$1.6 million (Rooks, 2017, p. 28). Rooks (2017) provides context for the significance of this relationship by emphasizing that DFER, in action, is not loyal to historically oppressed students but rather lobbies to “break teacher unions’ strangleholds over the Democratic Party”—directly connecting this organization with explicit corporate interests that aim to stifle collective bargaining efforts (p. 42).

Investigative journalist George Joseph supports the points made by Rooks in a 2013 article for *The Nation* titled “Astroturf Activism: Who is Behind Students for Education Reform?” After investigating DFER’s “\$1 million attacks on the Chicago Teachers Union” and their collaboration with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Joseph (2013a) argues that SFER is merely “a student network [serving as] an ‘education reform’ front for a lobbying firm, exploiting college idealism for corporate profit.” He uses an example from the fall of 2012, when SFER’s New York chapter protested against New York City teachers who were refusing to “compromise” on a \$450 million RTTT grant (Joseph, 2013a). Highlighting the hypocrisy in the protests, the author argues that the “‘compromise’ would place teachers at the mercy of a counterproductive test-based system, allowing ...their evaluative ratings to come from the standardized test scores of their students” (Joseph, 2013a). Ultimately, the article brings in the voices of historians and counter-protestors who were also unable to comprehend students organizing in support of high-stakes testing, test-based curriculum, and punitive accountability measures for teachers.

This front of student alignment with said corporate interests is particularly noteworthy in regard to the political campaigning element of SFER: the Action Network. Alexis Morin (2017) describes it as focused on pushing for the election of school board candidates that students want, through a kind of vetting—ultimately elevating the candidates that

represent and work in the interests of students. This part of SFER's work engulfs the attention of critical literature. In a September article on *Chalkbeat Colorado*, Melanie Asmar covered the work of SFER's Action Network in the competitive 2019 Denver School Board elections, noting their historical victories and current momentum. SFER had already spent \$122,000 on canvassing, polling, consulting, and researching two months before the election (Asmar, 2019). While detailing the significant role that ERN and DFER played in previous elections, much of the literature takes on a cynical tone, suggesting that SFER was only a change of tactics by DFER to use student canvassers and continue advancing pro-charter and business-oriented candidates (Asmar, 2019). It is important to note, however, that Asmar (2019) contends that such skepticism cannot be fully corroborated due to a lack of concrete and publicly available information on the Action Network's donors. She highlights University of Colorado professor Ben Kirshner who, "[i]n [his] research, [has] seen that when youth organizations enter the political fray, one tactic that is used to undermine them is to claim they are being manipulated by other people who are not as appealing," even though he has not studied SFER and DFER specifically (Asmar, 2019).

Straying from most literature surrounding SFER, which heavily critique its ties to corporate interests, Katz (2014) skeptically argues the initial existence of student-centered efforts that were co-opted after rapid, unnatural expansion from massive philanthropic funding in his blog "How to Spot a Fake 'Grassroots' Education Reform Group." Katz (2014) describes the exponential and national growth of SFER to over one hundred chapters in a matter of years—only possible through the monetary resources of corporations. However, Katz (2014) claims that the reach of "big money" does not simply stop with finances, but rather seeps into who is on the Board of Directors and making many of the decisions in the seemingly youth-led organization. There is a clear depiction that nearly all of SFER's board members are prominent leaders in the corporate sector: Amy Cou, the CEO of KIPP charter network; Adam Cioth, of Rolling Hills Capital and Goldman Sachs; Justin Cohen, the education president of a lobbyist organization that advocates for market-based solutions; etc. (Katz, 2014). Furthering these critical takes, Goyal (2012) offers a passionate rejection of SFER as led by the voices of students, but rather accuses the organization as wholeheartedly having a corporate agenda that takes advantage of unknowing students (p. 4).

The influences of corporate background players on the workings of the organization have created opportunities for reporters to highlight the unique experiences of those who were involved with SFER. Months after publishing his damning report on SFER's New York City protests against teachers, George Joseph wrote about what he deemed to be "a hopeful indication that the corporate narrative on education may finally be starting to unravel" (Joseph, 2013b). He covered a "rebellion within" the organization as multiple college chapters disaffiliated themselves from

SFER and members became vocal about the lack of bottom-up approaches and unwillingness to get involved in ‘hot button’ issues like the 2012 Chicago Teachers strikes (Joseph, 2013b). The literature specifically explores the UChicago and DePaul chapters’ frustrations with SFER’s seemingly “anti-teacher” narrative and its approach being “blatantly one-sided, unconditionally supporting the school turnarounds and the power of the mayor” (Joseph, 2013b). Due to the teacher strikes and multiple school closures being pushed by the then-mayor, Rahm Emanuel, members were convinced that SFER purposefully avoided engagement with issues that were relevant to thousands of students in Chicago; they ultimately chose to disaffiliate (Joseph, 2013b). Resistance by students within the organization was undoubtedly emphasized by the creation of Students United for Public Education (SUPE), founded by a former SFER member named Stephanie Rivera (see Appendix). Rivera’s critiques of SFER, which are not unfamiliar, represent student rejection of seemingly progressive education reform efforts and the dangerous neoliberal agendas and corporate interests they advance (Rivera, 2012).

In response to similar resistance and critical media coverage, SFER rebranded in 2020 - changing its name to Our Turn, shutting down hundreds of chapters, and further solidifying its facade. It is fundamental to acknowledge that the history detailed here is linked to the organization’s modern-day function, as opposed to something of the past.

Conclusion

The dangers of seemingly democratic policymaking and organizing that use progressive rhetoric to veil neoliberal motives are tremendous. These dangers are apparent in the landscape of U.S. education reform debates and discussions, particularly when looking at philanthropic intervention. An extensive interrogation of historical and contemporary practices by foundations highlights the obstacles that neoliberal and market-oriented practices pose to equitable public education. The case study on Students for Education Reform further solidifies the research by offering a specific example of unauthentic grassroots organizing. Philanthropic interventions are actively co-opting grassroots organizing to advance their self-motivated visions of society in communities most eager for change. Our literature review and case study add to scholarship that severely lacks comprehensive theorizing—it is our goal that this provides a generative framework to highlight the urgency necessary for this issue.

Considering the limits of the scholarship explored, there is a fundamental need for more research and visibility on the impacts of corporate interests in education reform, especially given its destructive implications on mainly vulnerable and historically oppressed communities. Even within texts that address these issues, very rarely do authors present alternatives to corporate-centered education reform and offer guidance to students, parents, and teachers attempting to resist

attacks on the public education system. With an understanding of fundamental values that center those most directly affected by education policies and organizing efforts, the following are promising practices that begin to build an authentic movement aiming for a truly equitable education system.

- *Authentic Grassroots Organizing*: To counter the destructive practices of Astroturf reform work and the neoliberal policy agendas pushed by corporate interests, Beauchamp (2014) concludes that “perhaps the best example of genuine, grassroots organizing for education reform is that which comes from the students themselves.” Valerie Strauss also echoes this in her disapproval of reform coming from “business leaders or entrepreneurs.... the Walton Foundation or Bill Gates”, rather than students or teachers (Beauchamp, 2014; Strauss, 2013).
- *Critical Pedagogy*: To dismantle oppressive cultures and the rooted ideologies of many social movements, Ross & Gibson (2007) introduce McLaren who unpacks the immense potential of critical pedagogy, which discusses Marxist class struggle as a means of social transformation. This idea is one that aims to reject the replication of oppressive hierarchies and systems (p. 13).
- *Opting Out of the Education Reform Industrial Complex*: Au and Hollar (2016) argue for students and teachers to opt-out of tests to dismantle education reform campaigns and disrupt capitalist constructions in schools. They call for this refusal because test data is the currency in the education reform industry and used to legitimize decisions regarding “educational ‘choice’, school closures, charter schools, and the evaluation of teachers and schools” (p. 36). In doing this, the authors reject schools and school reforms that ignore “social and historical conditions, complex issues of power and culture, even the life and spirit of people [and] flatten [them] into simple quantities for inspection, comparison, and ranking” (p. 36).

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Appendix: Stephanie Rivera's Resistance to SFER

As a student who experienced SFER from within and then explicitly resisted the organization, the specifics of Rivera's critiques are clearly indicative of SFER's co-optation of authentic grassroots organizing and the desires of students on the ground. In his article, Joseph (2013b) highlights Stephanie Rivera's frustration with the "misleading agenda [SFER] was promoting", which led to her work in co-founding SUPE for the promotion and protection of teachers and public education (Joseph, 2013b). Stephanie Rivera (2012) is an example of a student and former SFER member, who expressed strong values against traditionally neoliberal policies of high stakes testing and teacher evaluation (p. 1). She denounces SFER's school choice stance, as she argues that a truly equitable system would ensure universal quality public education (p. 4). She also exposes its corporate stakeholders, regarding them as lacking any proper experiences in education, yet have an immense level of influence (p. 3). Going even further, Rivera unpacks this influence in the context of the organization's said student voice values by pulling out "Our Board members provide guidance each step of the way" from the SFER website to question whether, in practice, the organization is truly youth-led (Rivera, 2012).