Introduction: Schooling in a Time of Crisis and Austerity

Schools express the conflicts and limitations as well as the hopes of a divided and unequal society; and they continue to be both testing grounds and battlegrounds for building a more just and freer life for all.

—Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America

As we drift further into the second decade of the twenty-first century, public schooling in the United States has become a focal point of anxiety and a signpost of sobering challenges. In the dominant media and among the financial and political elite, a corporate consensus has emerged that has declared public schooling to be a failed experiment—an antiquated social institution incapable of meeting the demands and assorted crises of the global era. The rhetoric of educational failure is most often invoked in relation to “urban education”—a not-so-subtle “race neutral” euphemism for public schools that serve primarily impoverished communities and mostly black and Latino youth. Dominant explanations for the perpetuation of “failure” in such schools—low test scores, dysfunctional environments, high dropout rates, and so on—have become increasingly predictable. Across a network of high-profile corporate reform advocates, right-wing think tanks, business groups, and corporate foundations the problem is said to be located in the inefficient and corrupt nature of the public sector itself and the supposed incompetence and greed of teachers and their unions. The future of the nation is said to depend on restructuring public school systems by subjecting them to commercial management and the private discipline of market forces. In order to save public education, it is argued, we must break-up the “public school monopoly” through the wholesale privatization of the educational commons. However, while the corporate reform movement has been framed in the progressive language of educational innovation and equity, the evidence continues to mount that free market experimentation has failed to improve public education in any meaningful sense while contributing to already staggering social and educational inequalities. In this light, the reforms appear to have more to do with political and economic expediency than with robust investment in the human development and the educational futures of all young people. How else to explain policies that continue to undermine the very public education system on which the future of the nation supposedly depends?
Not unlike the spectacular failure of the global financial system in 2008, the problems that confront inner-city public schools today can be attributed largely to a systemic failure—a toxic mixture of global economic change and volatility, profiteering and corruption, stunted imagination, and misguided policies, values, and priorities. This has contributed to deepening poverty and inequality in the urban sphere and the evaporation of social commitments to public schools and young people, particularly the most historically disadvantaged and vulnerable. *Schooling in the Age of Austerity* examines this systemic failure “on the ground” through an ethnographic case study in a low-income and racially segregated community and public high school in the city of Chicago. Through the perspectives of those most affected, namely youth and their teachers, it documents the lived contradictions and myriad impacts of educational privatization, disinvestment, commercialization, and the rise of a militaristic culture of policing and containment in urban public schools and neighborhoods. It argues that these processes are indicative of a neoliberal culture and political economy that is eroding the educative and democratic purpose of urban public schools while making the daily lives and futures of young people ever more precarious and insecure. While the book offers no easy answers or quick fixes, at its core is a belief that a vibrant system of public education is a key ethical component in imagining and realizing a future worthy of our highest aspirations and ideals. As such, it advocates for an educational vision that locates public schooling not as a *commodity* valued primarily for its role in shoring-up narrow economic and national security imperatives, but as a *commons*—a site critical to developing human security, economic justice, and democratic life. Such an educational vision is already shared by scores of educators, parents, students, and community activists who are deeply skeptical and disillusioned with corporate management and market experimentation in education and who yearn for public schools responsive to the complex needs and desires of youth and their communities; schools that do not reduce learning to issues of market competition, punishment, and test scores; and schools designed to cultivate restorative and sustainable futures for all young people.

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Over the last several years, I have had the good fortune of living in the city of Toronto, Ontario. As an American graduate student, living in Toronto has been valuable for observing issues concerning globalization and educational politics that have challenged and enriched my thinking not only about urban Canada but the United States as well. In 2007, during the first year of my doctoral studies at the University of Toronto, a 14-year-old student named Jordan Manners was shot and killed in the hallway of C. W. Jeffery’s Collegiate Institute—a public high school in North Toronto. This rare and tragic event engendered an outpouring of public discussion in the Toronto media and prompted three major governmental commissions, one headed by attorney Julian Falconer at the behest of former Toronto mayor David Miller, another conducted by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), and another provincial study undertaken by former Ontario minister Alvin Curling and former Ontario chief justice Roy McMurtry. Each of the investigations concluded that a variety of factors contribute to violence and