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Defining Democracy in the Neoliberal Age: Charter School Reform and Educational Consumption

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In this article Wells, Slayton, and Scott draw on data from their charter school research to question the extent to which "democratic" and "market-based" schools are dichotomous. They argue that in the current political and economic climate, free-market and deregulatory educational reforms such as charter school laws are perceived to be highly "democratic" by their neoliberal advocates and by many of the suburban school board members and superintendents in their case studies. Thus the authors call on progressive supporters of charter schools and public schools to couch their arguments for democratic schooling in a call for social justice and equity as opposed to greater "liberty"

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for educational consumers, whereby the more economically empowered consumers remain highly advantaged.

In the debate over privatization, deregulation, and school choice policies in education, proponents and opponents alike often contrast "democracy" and democratically controlled public schools with "markets" and market-based private or charter schools as if the two were separate, distinct, and diametrically opposed. The point of this article is to question the value of this framework by demonstrating how closely tied popular conceptions of democracy and markets really are. In fact, we contend that in the political and social climate of the late 20th century, these two terms became more synonymous than perhaps ever before as the ideology of capitalism and markets seeped into every aspect of our lives, including "democratic" institutions such as school boards. Thus our central argument is that, amid multiple and sometimes conflicting definitions of "democracy," progressive reformers should not assume that their interpretations of democratic education are the only—or even the more enduring—understandings.

Indeed, for the last 10 years, an increasingly popular connotation of democracy in the United States is that it represents the freedom to consume and own within a capitalist society. In education, the implication was freedom to choose schools and freedom from state regulation. To the extent that the so-called democratic dilemma has always been about the conflict between liberty and equality (see Lindbloom, 1977), we argue that in the current social and political context, liberty is clearly the victor.

To demonstrate our point, we present data from elected school board members and their appointed district administrators in suburban and suburban-rural[1] school districts in California. These school officials—all proponents of charter school reform—have come to see the role of the public educational system through a neoliberal,[2] or free-market, lens. As in every aspect of their suburban and relatively privileged situations, they seek a public educational system that is responsive to immediate demands of the consumers—at least those consumers with the economic, political, and social efficacy to make demands. This is how they have come to define democracy.

These suburban public school officials remind us that at the dawn of the 21st century, a more progressive democratic project as a means to greater equality and social justice is something that must be clearly articulated and juxtaposed to the far more prevalent neoliberal democratic vision. Absent such debates over the meaning of democracy in education, the "common sense" understanding of democracy within a capitalist society may well continue to gravitate toward the ideology of the market and the sanctity of individualism and liberty at all costs.

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Democracy versus Markets: The False Dichotomy

In 1990, John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe set out to distinguish what they considered to be the bureaucratic and unresponsive public education system from what they envisioned as a more efficient and responsive system of public funds for private school tuition. Thus they wrote extensively in their popular and often-cited book, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools,* about the distinctions between public and private schools, especially in terms of how they are governed and controlled. The most important such distinction, Chubb and Moe noted, is democracy versus markets:

> Throughout American society, democratic control and markets are the two major institutions by which social decisions get made and social resources get allocated, and they rather consistently distinguish the public and private sectors. Governments rely on democratic control almost regardless of what they are attempting to accomplish, while in the private sector virtually all activities of a productive or commercial nature . . . are heavily structured by markets. (p. 27)

Chubb and Moe then attempt to convince their readers that democracy is essentially coercive because the so-called "winners" in a representative democracy "get to use public authority to impose their policies on the losers" (p. 28). Thus, they argue, the "raison d'être" of democratic control in public education is to impose higher-order values on schools via regulations, thus limiting the schools' autonomy. They also offer a strong critique of teachers' unions as politically powerful institutions that put self-interest over the interests of students. As a result, they write, public schools are not allowed to set their own agendas and "are not in the business of pleasing parents and students" (p. 37).

In many ways Chubb and Moe established the parameters within which much of the subsequent debate between school choice and privatization would take place. Thus, shortly after *Politics, Markets and America's Schools* was published, the progressive supporters of public education who oppose privatization and tuition voucher plans responded to Chubb and Moe—both directly and indirectly—by defending "democratic" public schools and proclaiming markets as highly "undemocratic."

For instance, in a 1994 article titled "More Democracy Not Less: Confronting the Challenge of Privatization in Public Education," Noguera argued that public school parents, rather than receiving vouchers, should be "empowered as decision makers through efforts aimed at democratizing public school governance even further" (p. 248). He cited reforms such as the community control movement of the 1960s as one possible, more democratic alternative to vouchers.

Similarly, in a 1996 report on the failures of market-based privatization efforts in education, Ascher, Fruchter, and Berne called on those who believe that a strong public education system is a precondition for democracy to help resolve the inadequacies of public schooling that feed the impulse to privatize.

Privatization critic Molnar asserted that market-based reforms such vouchers, for-profit school management companies, and charter schools are built on the illusion that our society can be held together solely by the self-centered pursuit of our individual purposes as opposed to common, democratic purposes. He notes that

> The struggle is not between market-based reforms and the educational status quo. It is about whether the democratic ideal of the common good can survive the onslaught of a market mentality that threatens to turn every human relationship into a commercial transaction. (cited in Smith, 2001, p. 2)

Of course, the juxtaposition of democracy and markets was not simply the work of Chubb and Moe. Indeed, Finkelstein (1984) wrote well before Chubb and Moe's book that educational reforms that embraced private-sector solutions revealed a "retreat from democracy" (p. 275). But it is clear that Chubb and Moe's book set the stage for many years of debate and defensiveness between those who support public schools as the symbol of democracy and those who support privatization and school choice as free market mechanisms designed to rid the educational system of waste and inefficiency and to empower consumers.

Yet, beyond this discussion about the best governance system for schools, a larger societal shift in the understanding of the relationship between democracy and free markets was taking place. Thus the distinction between "democracy" and "markets" that Chubb and Moe had articulated in 1990 had, even by the mid-1990s, become less evident, as advocates of deregulated, free market school choice came to see their reform agenda as very "democratic" in a very neoliberal sort of way. For instance, what Chubb and Moe claimed to be so appalling about "democratically" controlled schools—namely, their inability to cater to their customers—is exactly what later neoliberal public school critics would argue is so "undemocratic" about the public system. Indeed, this rhetorical shift reminds us that the relationship between markets and democracy has a long, complicated relationship in U.S. political history.

The Symbiotic Relationship between Liberal Democracy and Markets

Of course, as we noted above, the issue of "democracy" versus the "market" both historically and today centers on how democracy is defined. Virtually all writers and speakers tend to use the word "democracy" with very positive connotations, but rarely do they specify what exactly they mean. Distinctions between different conceptions of democracy—e.g., between liberal democracy, communitarian democracy, deliberative democracy, and radical democracy—are extremely important, especially as they relate to public policy. Obviously, advocates of these different democracies draw sharply different conclusions about the role that government should play in institutions such as schools.

Indeed, a careful study of the dominant discourse of democracy in the United States, especially in the last decade, demonstrates that the democracy *versus* markets dichotomy is misleading, as political leaders in this country—mostly conservative Republicans but also "New Democrats"—have continually promoted democracy *for* markets. Within this "liberal democratic" paradigm wrapped in neoliberal ideology, the liberty enjoyed under our democratic system is the central mechanism through which free-market capitalism has flourished.

According to Lindbloom (1977), liberty and equality have, historically, been two conflicting "ends" that different proponents of democracy have sought to achieve. Thus some advocates of democracy see it as the best means to achieve a more equitable and socially just society. Others understand democracy as the means to protect and enlarge liberty, particularly the liberty of those who own property—a means of constitutional restrictions on the prerogatives of government. Despite these conflicting views, Lindbloom notes that for the most part in the United States, "the history of democracy is largely an account of the pursuit of liberty" (p. 162).

Lindbloom argues that, historically, the dominant democratic paradigm in the United States has been "liberal," meaning libertarian, and focused on freedom from government control or constraint, especially in terms of property and propriety. For instance, he writes that although the American revolution was, in theory, one of the great "democratic" revolutions, the revolutionaries and constitutional framers were far more interested in liberty and freedom than they were in democracy as a form of popular control (p. 163).

This libertarian framework for U.S. democracy was reinforced during the first half of the 19th century when White Southern Democrats, struggling to maintain the institution of slavery, defined "freedom" within a democratic society as opposition to government intervention or regulation (Foner, 1998). In fact, Foner (1998) writes that during this era, "like the democratization of politics, which defined political freedom as a function of self-ownership, . . . changes in economic and religious life strongly encouraged the spread of a liberal understanding of freedom as the absence of external constraints upon autonomous, self-directed individuals" (p. 55).

Furthermore, Lindbloom (1977) notes that since the 19th century, when Marx and the socialists became the spokespeople for equality, the egalitarian tradition in democracy has been subordinated to the libertarian tradition. And thus, economic independence has remained a defining element of political freedom in the United States (Apple, 2001, Foner, 1998). This emphasis was perhaps most clearly articulated by Macpherson (1973), who noted the distinction between democratic theory in the West and in other parts of the world:

> The first thing that emerges from any examination of contemporary Western democratic theory, as distinct from the communist theory of democracy and the various populist theories prevalent in much of the third world, is that the Western theory puts a high value on individual freedom of choice, not only as between political parties but also as between different uses of one's income, of one's capital and of

> one's skill and energy. Western democracy is a market society, through
> and through; or, if one prefers to confine the term democracy to a sys-
> tem of government rather than a kind of society, Western democracy
> is for market society (p. 25).

This is not to say that the definitions and democratic paradigms have not shifted slightly over time. Indeed, during at least three critical periods of U.S. history—Reconstruction, the New Deal, and the Civil Rights Movement—"liberalism" and democracy were viewed differently, as a mixture of a new belief in government assistance programs with a traditional commitment to an ideology of individual rights (see Bronner, 1997).

For instance, Foner (1998) writes that the so-called Reconstruction amendments transformed the U.S. Constitution from a document primarily concerned with "federal-state relations and the rights of property to a vehicle through which members of vulnerable minorities could stake a claim to substantive freedom and seek protection against misconduct by all levels of government" (p. 107). Later, in the 1902s, just prior to the New Deal, progressive writers began to advocate a more activist and interventionist government in the name of greater equality. And as we remarked in note 1, these progressives began to use the word "liberalism" as a substitute for "progressivism," thereby linking the term "liberal" to supporters of a welfare state and a government safety net—a definition of "liberals" that is uniquely American (see Yergin and Stanislaw, 1998, p. 15).

Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, Apple (2001) notes, the progressive movement took certain elements of the classical liberal understanding of personal freedom, radicalized them, and mobilized around issues of free speech, labor rights, economic security, women's rights, birth control, racial justice, the right to a truly equal education, and many other struggles for social justice. Thus, during the Civil Rights era, as during Reconstruction, democracy stood for equality by extending liberties to disenfranchised groups (Apple, 2001). What makes these three eras so distinct within much of U.S. history is that during each of them, government was seen as playing a very important role in promoting democratic principles.

But by the early 1980s, a massive political backlash swelled against many, but not all, aspects of the "liberalism" from both the New Deal and Civil Rights eras, echoing the strong political backlash by Whites against Reconstruction from the prior century (Apple, 2001; Bronner, 1997; Giroux, 2001; Schulman, 2001). In the 1980s and 1990s, the aspects of progressive liberal politics designed to bring about more equality—especially along racial, gender and social class lines—were rejected when conservatives (of both the neoliberal and neoconservative stripes) mounted their assault on "big government" and "welfare dependency" (Bronner, 1997; Frank, 2000; Yergin & Stanislaw, 1998).

The result of this assault and the political rhetoric that accompanied it was a redefining and reaffirmation of "democracy" in the service of the market. A renewed libertarian political/economic paradigm—neoliberalism—

became the defining ideology of the age in which we live. Apple (2001) quotes McChesney, who defines neoliberal initiatives as free market policies that encourage private enterprise and consumer choice, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative, and undermine governments' "incompetent bureaucracy" (p. 17).

Unlike the liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s, today's neoliberalism, grounded in the desire to afford individuals more freedom for their market-based initiatives, privileges those who have the economic, social, and political power to make the market work for them. Gone is any political momentum toward a more equal democracy. Labor unions—never particularly strong in the United States—have become even less popular, as did policies such as procurement laws, affirmative action, and school desegregation (see Frank, 2000).

Indeed, Saltman (2000) argues that the effacement of moral and political principles of equality is the result of a concerted effort on the part of a ruling class to capture the language of democracy and redefine it in private terms. He writes, "The metaphor of choice in the contemporary context also idealizes business. Hence, democratic decisions framed in market terms of consumption tend to conflate democratic participation with shopping" (p. 53).

Saltman (2000) cites the dissolution of the Soviet Union as critical to the neoliberal redefinition of "democracy." He notes that neoliberal and neoconservative writers seized upon the fall of the Berlin Wall to claim that capitalism had triumphed over communism. "In the triumphalist rhetoric," he writes, "democracy has largely become synonymous with liberal capitalism" (p. xiii). Apple (2001) captured this ideology when he argued that "neoliberalism transforms our very idea of democracy, making it only an economic concept, not a political one."

Similarly, Frank (2000) writes that American opinion leaders are convinced that democracy and the free market are identical. Furthermore, he argues that in the 1990s, the narrative of populist Wall Street was as follows:

> When pundits spoke of the stock market having been "democratized," they implied that the market now functioned like a democracy. . . . that the market represented the people, that it acted on the people's behalf, that it spoke in the vox populi. Markets were not merely organs of exchange, they were a never-ended election that had, in Thomas Friedman's phrase, "turned the whole world into a parliamentary system," a place where people "vote every hour, every day through their mutual funds, their pension funds, their brokers, and more and more, from their own basements via the internet" (p. 93).

Indeed, even in the wake of the disaster of September 11, 2001, Americans were called upon to show their patriotism and support through the process of consumption. Purchasing everything from airline tickets to stars-and-stripes lapel pins was supposed to sooth a mourning nation. To return to "normal" meant to return to the business of consumerism, which certainly feeds the economy but does nothing for the country's political health (see Reich, 2001). According to Giroux (2002), in an age in which democracy and

capitalism are regularly used as synonyms and the United States is recovering from the worst domestic attack in history, there is no space in which to deliberate the ills of capitalism or a democracy so narrowly tailored to maintain it.

Clearly, as capitalism has become more global, fewer and fewer alternative economic systems exist, and more and more countries become so-called capitalist democracies like the United States, the conceptual bond between the liberatory potential of democracy and capitalism has grown stronger. Simultaneously, people's ability to think of alternative visions or purposes of democracy has declined. This is true for public school educators as well.

Saltman (2000) describes this phenomenon:

> As identity and language become redefined in corporate terms, the democratic tradition of universal care, equity, and concern with the social becomes superfluous. This can be witnessed in the way that education debates have become "monopolized" by the market terms of efficiency, competition, quality, and management. Students are characterized as clients and teachers as service workers. (p. 34)

Certainly we found evidence of this ideology in our studies of charter schools in California, particularly in the suburban and suburban-rural school districts where public school officials—democratically elected board members and their appointees—demonstrated a new and evolving correspondence between the postindustrial capitalist system and public education. This correspondence, of course, has different implications for schools and communities in wealthy suburbs than it does for students in impoverished urban neighborhoods (see Scott & Holme, 2002).

Furthermore, despite the neoliberal argument that school districts and the bureaucrats who run them are generally unnecessary and wasteful—relics of a welfare state that we no longer need or can afford—we found that in many instances it was school district officials who embraced charter school reform and often fostered the development of new charter schools. In general, what we learned from our interviews is that the neoliberal ideology of charter school reform fits very well the entrepreneurial image that many suburban school district leaders like to craft for themselves and their nonurban school districts.

Of course, there are many reasons why neoliberal ideology would flourish within the context of charter school reform. It is, after all, a reform movement with deep and strong neoliberal political roots.

Neoliberalism and U.S. Charter School Reform

Conceptualized in part as a reform movement with the potential to accommodate so many of these neoliberal efforts to dismantle so-called antiquated and unwieldy public education bureaucracies (Chubb & Moe, 1990), charter school legislation, now passed in 38 states, allows individual schools greater autonomy from state education regulations and local district guidelines.

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Thus charter school laws generally provide more flexibility in how schools are staffed—e.g., by allowing them to hire nonunion, uncertified teachers and nonunionized classified staff in many cases—and releasing them from requirements of state laws and court orders governing the use of public funds, including procurement laws.

Indeed, in many state and national policy making circles, charter school reform is grounded in a strong antigovernment sentiment that has become increasingly popular among neoliberals across the country. As Lubienski (2001) points out in his study of Michigan, the "public" among neoliberal reformers and advocates of charter schools no longer refers to the broader community of taxpayers, much less citizens. Rather, the "public" is seen as only those immediately owning or consuming a good or service—"private ownership for the 'consumer' and 'producer' is the key to implementing this vision of a redefined public education" (p. 642).

This antigovernment and thus antipublic education ideology was expressed clearly by a senator we interviewed in a southwestern state (see Wells, Grutzik, Carnochan, Slayton, & Vasudeva, 1999), who is a strong proponent of charter schools and vouchers: Public schools today, he said, "are not very high functioning organizations" because they are bureaucratic and noncompetitive in the sense that "they really don't, for the most part, understand the general concept of accountability like private sector institutions do. They don't have customers. They have captive clients."

Still, charter school movement cannot be simply characterized as a "neoliberal" reform (see Wells, 2002). Although it certainly embraces and furthers many of the central tenets of neoliberal ideology, advocates and founders of charter schools represent very different political and philosophical perspectives—from neoconservative members of the religious right to more leftist and progressive educators who seek autonomy from a state-run system to provide viable educational alternatives to students who have not succeeded in the traditional educational system (see Rofes, 1996; Wells, 1997).

Over the last 40 years, advocates as dissimilar as civil rights leaders, Black separatists, progressive or free school educators, and conservative free-market economists have argued for various types of school choice policies, including alternative schools, magnet schools, voluntary transfer and open enrollment plans, and tuition voucher programs (Maynard, 1970; Wells, 1993). Members of these groups and many others have been instrumental in bringing about charter school reform. In fact, the multiple political roots of charter school reform have contributed to its broad-based popularity and bipartisan support (see Fuller, 2000; Shanker, 1994; Wells et al., 1999).

These diverse historical roots, coupled with the different political contexts in each state, have led to wide variations in the scope and content of each state's charter school law, leaving some more neoliberal than others. Some, for instance, provide schools with blanket exceptions from state and local regulations, allow for-profit corporations to manage charter schools, place fewer restrictions on charter schools' admissions policies, and allow charter schools to hire uncertified teachers. Other states do not allow charter

schools to have admissions criteria, hire uncertified teachers, be converted from private schools, or escape all state and district regulation (see Bierlein, 1995; Millot, 1994; RPP International, 2000). Similarly, as the data from one of the studies discussed in this article reveal, charter school reform under the same state law and guidelines can look dramatically different in different school districts and local school communities (see UCLA Charter School Study, 1998).

Still, a central theme of many neoliberal advocates of charter school reform is that the "strongest" charter laws are those that assure maximum deregulation (e.g., blanket exceptions to state laws and local policies), allow private and for-profit schools to become charters, and call for multiple charter-granting agencies. "Weaker" laws are those that are considered more regulatory and only allow local school districts to grant charters (Center for Educational Reform, 2001). So a key theme of the more neoliberal advocates of charter school reform is to bypass school districts completely.

Echoing Chubb and Moe's overly simplistic dichotomy between democratically controlled public schools and market-run private schools, Finn, Bierlein, and Manno (1996) note that "foot-dragging and enmity" by local school boards and superintendents toward charter schools were widespread in the charter-school world. Furthermore, they add that except in a few states where charter schools are commonly sponsored by state entities or universities, "people seeking charters must invest immense amounts of time and energy in trying to convince local school boards to approve their proposals" (p. 7).

These and other charter school advocates argue that in states where the charter law does not allow agencies other than local school boards to grant charters, very few charter schools get off the ground. This seems a little odd, given that in California, the state with the second highest number of charter schools in the country after Arizona (about 400 in Arizona compared with about 300 in California), the law entrusts local school boards as the primary charter granting agencies. (Charter petitioners in California can appeal to their county boards of education or the state board of education if they are denied approval by their local board. Still, local school boards have granted all but a handful of charter schools in the state.)

In conducting our research in California, we were curious about how this fervent anti–school district rhetoric related to the lived experiences of people founding charter schools. As one of the superintendents we interviewed noted, many charter advocates are quick to "rip" school superintendents and argue that they are "strangling" their charter schools. "This is crap," he said. "We are all not that way, and [charter advocates] know damn right well we're not, so don't go out making us the villains in this."

Sensing that the relationships and dynamics between charter schools and their local school districts are more complex and less universal than many neoliberal reformers would lead us to believe, we set out to study charter school reform at the district and school levels. What we learned was that often, school board officials were as steeped in the ideology of free-market reform as any neoliberal advocate.

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A Study of Charter Schools and Neoliberalism in California

In the following sections of this article, we draw on data from two different but overlapping studies. The first study, from which the bulk of these data are drawn, was known as the UCLA Charter School Study (1998). The purpose of that qualitative case study of charter school reform in ten California school districts was to examine this hugely popular reform movement through the eyes of diverse groups of people who were centrally involved in charter schools or were affected by them directly or indirectly. All three authors of this article were researchers on that study, which focused on the linkage between the assumptions of policymakers and the lived reality of educators, parents, and students in various communities, particularly those that are most disadvantaged (see UCLA Charter School Study, 1998).[3]

Thus we choose not to study charter schools as isolated institutions removed from the political, economic, and social forces that surround them but rather to examine these new schools within the context of their local communities and school districts. In order to look at the multiple meanings of charter school reform across different contexts, we purposively selected a sample of ten districts that differed on several key factors,[4] including size; racial and socioeconomic diversity; location in an urban, rural, or suburban community; geographic location in southern, central, or northern California; number and percentage of charter schools in the district; and the type of charter school (e.g., independent study, conversion from a public school, a new start-up school, home school, and primary as opposed to secondary charter school).

This sampling for difference was one way in which we tried to understand the multiple meanings of charter school reform from divergent community standpoints. We ended up with a sample of five large urban districts; three districts that seemed rural based on their location and demographics but turned out to have some suburban track housing—bedroom communities— within their boundaries; and two districts that were suburban, one of which also incorporated a section of a rural farming community.

The number of charter schools per district varied from only 1 charter school each in four of the ten districts to 14 charter schools in one of the large urban districts. All totaled, these ten districts house 39, or about one third of all the charter schools in the state at that time (1996–1998).

In the first round of data collection, we visited each of the ten school districts and interviewed district administrators, school board members, local community advocates, and union leaders. We conducted observations of district level meetings, including school board meetings on charter school approvals, and collected charter-related documents. In the second and third rounds of data collection, we spent most of our time at the charter schools, but also conducted follow-up interviews with people in the district offices and with school board members as necessary.

Yet the findings presented in this article are drawn primarily from five suburban and suburban-rural districts of the UCLA Charter School Study

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(1998), as well as from a second study by Scott (forthcoming), who collected in another suburban district in California. This second study focuses on Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) and the democratic purposes of charter school reform (see Scott, forthcoming). By drawing on Scott's (forthcoming) study, we are able to examine data from six suburban or suburban-rural school districts. For the purposes of this article, we have excluded the data drawn from the five urban districts that were part of the UCLA Charter School Study simply because the neoliberal ideology was much more prevalent in the relatively wealthy suburbs than it was in the poorer and much more diverse and contested urban school districts. The distinction between these urban and suburban districts is fascinating and important; it was explored to some degree in an earlier paper on neoliberalism and charter school reform (Wells & Slayton, 1997).

The focus of this article, however, is on the way in which district administrators and school board members in these six districts made meaning of charter school reform and how their meanings speak to the neoliberal ideology fueling charter school reform in the policy arena and how they related to understandings of democracy and public education.

Social-Cultural, Political, Economic Differences across Districts

The six suburban-rural districts we studied as part of the UCLA Charter School Study and Scott's subsequent research ranged in size from about 1,000 to 20,000 students and were, in general, much more racially and socioeconomically homogeneous than the urban districts. All but two of these five districts were at least two-thirds White, which is quite high in a state in which less than 50 percent of the school-age population is White (see RPP International, 2000). To the extent that there was diversity along racial and class lines, it was generally between White and wealthy landowners and much poorer Latino farm workers.

The Latino families residing in these districts were usually described to us not as recent immigrants but rather as more established families. Even in the two districts that had enough migrant students to qualify for federal migrant education funds, district officials talked about the same families and students returning to the districts each year.

Many of the respondents in these suburban-rural districts described their communities as politically conservative—either in a neoconservative cultural sense of a "traditional" or very religious population or in a neoliberal, corporate sense. For instance, in many of the rural districts, respondents spoke of families with strong Christian beliefs. In more suburban areas, respondents spoke of people in the community involved in high-growth industries such as technology or development.

Most of these districts were experiencing growth in terms of recent suburban development of single family homes on large subdivided plots or younger families with children moving into existing housing stock. Some of the respondents spoke of people moving into their districts to escape the

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cities. Many described their areas in which these school districts are located as "small towns" and places with a "community feeling." Several respondents evoked the image of "small country schools" across the different suburban-rural districts.

This was less true, however, in the larger and more racially and ethnically diverse suburban-rural districts, one of which was geographically and demographically divided between one side of the district, a poorer farming community, and the other side, where White and wealthy families, many of them older retirees, live in modern and often gated communities. In fact, in this district the ethnic breakdown of the student population, which is about 58 percent Latino and 36 percent White, is almost the exact opposite of that of the adult population, which is almost 60 percent White and only 37 percent Latino.

In all of the six suburban-rural districts, school board members are elected at large, although in one district a seat is reserved for a representative from a particular community. In each of these districts, nearly all of the school board members and the top district administrators are White. In five of the six districts the teachers are part of a local bargaining unit, but the unions are not particularly strong or vocal.

Starting Charters: Neoliberal Ideology and Political Contexts

The ways in which neoliberal ideology and understandings of democracy play out in these school districts is illustrative of how district officials and schools board members make sense of schools and educational reforms in accordance with their own economic, political, and social realities. The following sets of themes emerged: Namely, we learned that given the neoliberal ideology of school officials in these districts, charter school reform was consistent with their view of public education and democracy. Thus they sought to help found, maintain, and use charter schools as a way to further their entrepreneurial agenda in education.

"It's Not a Rebellion": Starting Charters in the Burbs

In all but one of the suburban-rural districts that we studied, at least one member of the school board or the superintendent (or both) were intricately involved in the creation of the charter schools. In fact, in each district, these officials played critical supportive roles in the founding of at least one of the charter schools. And in each of these cases, had it not been for strong district-level leadership, the charter schools might not have gotten off the ground.

In the sixth suburban-rural district, the largest and one of the more racially diverse of the six districts, the school board was highly supportive of the charter school even though the energy and enthusiasm for it clearly came from the educators and parents at the school and not from the district.

What is interesting about the stories of these six districts is not so much the degree to which district-level administrators or school board members

initially embraced charter school reform but rather *why* they did. In general, what we learned from our interviews is that the neoliberal ideology of charter school reform very much fits the entrepreneurial image that these school district leaders like to craft for themselves and their nonurban school districts. Even in districts where parents and community members have rejected the traditional public education system for cultural and moral—or "neoconservative"—reasons, the free-market and highly individualized philosophy of neoliberalism accommodates their demands for more autonomy from state mandates and thus more local control over their children's education.

Often steeped in the recent school reform literature in educational administration, the superintendents of these smaller, more homogeneous school districts were not hesitant to jump onto the charter school bandwagon and make their entrepreneurial mark in communities that generally applauded their efforts. In this way, we learned that in the smaller and more demographically homogeneous school districts, charter school reform is not at all perceived as the "enemy"—as something that must be thwarted at all costs. On the contrary, charter school reform is very much an extension of how democracy in the suburbs has been defined.

For instance, the superintendent of one small suburban and predominantly White and wealthy school district was the person who brought the idea of a charter school to his community. In describing his original vision of what the charter would look like and what it would do for his district, he talked about bringing in students from other nearby school districts to attend the charter at "$3,000 a crack," referring to the per-pupil state education funds that the students would bring with them. He said he planned to use that additional funding to provide a different educational delivery system—"How do you create innovation? How do you create opportunities for entrepreneurship? That's how I saw the opportunity."

In addition to bringing in extra students and their state funds, this superintendent saw the charter school law as a mechanism for attracting other, private funding sources because he was aware that the Business Roundtable was very supportive of charter school reform and thus would look more favorably on districts that engaged in that kind of market-based reform.

This dynamic educational leader, supported by a school board that was decidedly anti-union and probusiness, talked about how writing the charter proposal was the right move at the right time:

> The best time to change is when you are doing well. . . . It's that sort of 20–80 rule, you get 80 percent of your efficiency the first 20 percent every time you do something—sort of a venture capital model. And we had a good group of folks who wanted to do it, there was no doubt our board wanted to do it.

In fact, this superintendent's keen sense of timing helped him to persuade more than 10 percent of the teachers in the district to approve the charter—the percentage required at that time by California law—even though the new

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charter school was not required to hire credentialed teachers, nor were the charter school's teachers to be part of the union. This was a potential obstacle for the joint venture because the superintendent found himself caught between the members of the local teachers' association who wanted union representation on the charter school's governing council and the school board members who were adamantly opposed to having their new charter school unionized.

The superintendent explained the board members' resistance to the union this way: "[This] is a community where most of the community members have never worked under collective bargaining issues. They are all venture capitalists, high tech folks . . . so there was no way in the world they wanted to have this charter be part of collective bargaining."

In fact, several of the school board members we interviewed reiterated this view, noting that they did not believe in tenure or collective bargaining for teachers. Several of the five board members spoke negatively about the "noncompetitive" teacher "culture" in the district, which meant that the teachers did not want to draw comparisons across schools, nor did they want to nominate one teacher to be the teacher of the year. One board member noted that the teachers "don't want anybody to stand out" and don't want any competition. "Sometimes that works in a negative way . . . as a real suppresser of radical innovation."

Being an expert negotiator served the superintendent well, and he managed to craft a "compromise" that allowed the charter proposal, which he wrote himself, to get past one fourth of the teachers without any collective bargaining for the charter school teachers and without requiring them to be credentialed. In return, the superintendent made an agreement with the union that no teacher in the district would loose his or her job as a result of the charter. (This agreement meant that the new innovative charter school would have to recruit students from outside the district, so as not to drain enrollment from the existing district schools.)

Reflecting on his timing regarding the charter, which also assisted him in developing new and very lucrative business partnerships for all of the schools in his district, the superintendent noted that most superintendents did not find the charter idea too appealing—"too new, not enough regs, it's too Wild West." He added, however, that this is a legitimate view, given who superintendents are and the situations in which they find themselves. He said that if he were in a large urban school district he might not be so excited about the prospect of starting a charter school because, in particular, it would be much more difficult to attract students and public funds from nearby districts. "I mean, where am I going to attract kids from, it's [a large urban district], already a big area. All you're doing is rejuggling everything, you're just redistributing the resources."

Board members in this district were quick to point out that they were in agreement with the superintendent and that they, too, were instrumental in getting the charter school up and running. Several mentioned the cohesion of the school board and the lack of any major tensions in the district. One

board member reiterated that the starting of a charter school in this district did not signify a "rebellion" from the district.

This ideological homogeneity speaks to several of the points that Oliver makes in his 2001 book titled *Democracy in Suburbia*. He notes, for instance, that in suburban communities, a great many of which are "very singular in their social composition," very little deliberative democracy occurs. Therefore, in a community composed only of affluent homeowners, conflict and struggle over ideology and what is best for schoolchildren is less likely to occur. Oliver writes, "Many suburban governments are constituted solely by people of one class, one race, or one type of land tenure" (p. 5).

As another school board member from this affluent suburb explained, echoing many board members in the suburban-rural districts, the charter did not represent a revolt against the district and its leadership; rather it was an extension of the vision of that very leadership:

> What possible interest would the board have in an independent, willful, stubborn, child? And I think the success of our charter has been the negotiation of the connection [to the district]. . . . 'Cause that's the way it was conceived. And remember who I told you led in the effort. This wasn't a group of [angry] parents, this wasn't a creation of malcontents. This was a system creation. The best people in our community came together. . . . They looked at this district as being a quality district and this was just the next step in being a quality district. We . . . came together because we trusted the superintendent to be designing something that was consistent with the quality we saw in our district. We didn't have any sense that this was gonna be . . . [that] we were gonna create something removed from us.

In other suburban-rural districts that we studied, superintendents were similarly excited about the potential of charter school reform. For instance, in one district where the now deceased superintendent was the instigator behind the charter, the current superintendent—echoed by many of the board members—talked about how he saw the chartering idea as matching "the vision" he had for the district.

In the predominantly Latino suburban California district featured in Scott's (forthcoming) study, the superintendent saw charter school reform as a partial solution to overcrowding without having to reassign students to schools. This superintendent went even further down the privatization path by embracing a for-profit educational management organization, referred to by the pseudonym "Harrison," that wrote the charter and started the school. The superintendent talked about the ways in which he and his staff assisted and supported the charter school and Harrison. For instance, he noted that when the charter was submitted and accepted by the board, the Harrison staff and the district staff went out into the school district community together to "drum up interest." Indeed, the relationship between the district and Harrison appears to be quite close as described by the superintendent:

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> We did that [recruited students] together, both Harrison and the district employees, by holding community meetings around the district. We selected the principal early on, released her [from the district], and Harrison bought her, and I brought in another principal to fill her spot, for her to start the recruitment and get the school open and get it developed. We then drew up a management agreement that talks about the relationship, fiscally and instructionally, with regard to what they're going to do and how they're going to operate, and what their procedures are going to be.

In short, there are several layers of appeal for public school district officials. Charter school reform and its neoliberal roots were attractive to many suburban and rural public education officials who had come to understand democracy in market terms. Clearly, in many instances, they were attracted by the probusiness, procompetition, and proderegulatory nature of charter school reform. This ideology seemed to jibe with their own entrepreneurial desires and aspirations. At times, some of them sounded more like Wall Street investment bankers than public school officials.

Even in the one district where the board and superintendent were not directly involved in the founding of the charter, the superintendent and several board members said they were very supportive of the charter and saw charter reform as something with which they wanted their district associated. According to the superintendent, "we thought it was an option that we wanted to look at. . . . We were very pleased."

As the above example illustrates, support for charter schools seemed to play out in three central themes:

1. The perceived need to give efficacious parents more choice and more control and an understanding that they should be treated more like "customers."
2. The desire to be free of certain public school system regulations, especially union regulations and procurement laws that are time-consuming and often more expensive.
3. The related desire to wheel and deal and make some money—either bringing in more revenue (read "students") or cutting costs by hiring less expensive employees.

Keep the Customers Satisfied. Several of the superintendents in these smaller and more homogenous districts spoke of the importance of providing parents with choices as perhaps the last hope for public education. Sometimes they spoke of the need to serve their customers and keep them happy so that they would not abandon the public schools or support policies such as voucher programs that could result in the dismantling of public education. At other times they spoke of choice for the sake of choice—because of parents' right to have their children associate only with people who are like them.

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For instance, in one of the small, rural, religiously conservative districts that we studied, a district administrator noted that the school board and district officials all were big supporters of charter schools because they thought that those schools could "meet the needs of the customer" better than the regular public schools. This was the school district that supported several charter schools, including a large and controversial home-schooling charter through which home-schooling parents were getting financial support from the state for their teaching materials. Furthermore, this is a district official who said he thinks vouchers are a good thing because they give choice, even though he has logistical concerns about how a voucher plan would be implemented.

Similarly, in another rural district that also supported a large and controversial home-schooling charter school, the superintendent stated that it was his belief that districts needed to offer more choices to people. He said that while he would not want his other public school colleagues to hear him say it, "I believe that ultimately, it should be the parents' choice, not the state a.k.a. the school district, a.k.a. administrators, a.k.a. teachers."

Yet in their discussions of the need to provide the parents of today's students with greater choice, these district officials rarely if ever considered their obligation to a broader "public." Lubienski (2001) refers to this in his discussion of the ways in which school choice policies shift the focus on public policy to the specific "clientele" of the moment and away from the broader community of taxpayers, much less citizens. Indeed, he notes that within this rhetoric the "public" is seen as consisting only of the people who immediately own or consume a good or service. In this way, "schools are 'public' just as a restaurant is a public accommodation for its customers or a corporation can 'go public' by selling stock on the market" (p. 642).

Yet as Lubienski (2001) and others point out, there is a danger in a diverse and unequal society when public education is no longer seen as a public good but rather as a private good. This is particularly the case when the "customers" who are the most catered to are those with greater economic, social, and political resources in their local contexts and those who choose to limit their associations with others who are less privileged or less accepted.

For instance, in the first rural district mentioned above, a school board member noted that it is important to provide families with choice and to subsidize their home schooling efforts with state funds via charter school reform because "there are people who either politically or maybe for religious reasons didn't like what was taught in public schools. . . . Uh, didn't want their kids involved with other people."

Deregulation and Flexibility: The Free Market Way. Yet providing customers with choice was not the only reason why many of the suburban and rural public school officials we interviewed supported charter school reforms. Although these officials sometimes spoke of trying to improve student achievement, more frequently they mentioned the resource and staffing flexibility and revenue-generating aspects of charter school reform.

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For instance, the superintendent of one of the suburban-rural school districts talked about how he helped to start a charter school in his district:

> We had [the director of the school] . . . came to me, and I don't know if you have had the opportunity to meet with him yet. He's an interesting individual. He's libertarian at heart. He doesn't like government, he doesn't like anything, and he's a son of a gun. . . . We've gone round and round but I said . . . what you need to do is quit trying to get into our school system. [You] need to go off with all your ideas and form your own. He said, "Well, that's fine but how do I do that?" I said, "Charter schools . . . you run with it." . . . So [he] kind of did that, and he went away and he came back and said, "I kind of like this idea" and went in and basically said to the [school] board, "This is what we'd like to do."

In the suburban-rural district where the now-deceased superintendent had led the charge for charter school reform, his successor noted that a central driving force for the former superintendent was his perceived need for greater flexibility in staffing and the ability to "do things" his own way.

One of the school board members in this district praised the leadership of the former superintendent in introducing charter school reform to the district. She spoke of all the benefits that the district has accrued as a result—namely more freedom to "do things," such as not having to get as many bids for building and contracting or not following state procurement laws. She referred to the former superintendent as an incredibly dynamic person who knew how to bring private grant money into the district.

She also mentioned the charter school's ability to hire noncredentialed teachers and being able to require parents and students to sign a contract regarding their commitment to the charter and to their moral and ethical code as major advantages of having the charter. In this way, she saw the charter school as serving a niche in the market, namely predominantly White and middle-class parents who were seeking a "safer environment for their kids." Left out of the niche was the growing Latino population in the area; this situation relates to the issues of consumer choice and public education discussed above.

Rarely, if ever, do these suburban and rural public school officials stop to consider the history of the regulations that they resist. We did not hear from them any consideration of who loses when procurement laws are abandoned or how the less expensive contractors and providers pay their employees less and provide them with fewer benefits. Nor did we hear much from the entrepreneurial leaders about the historical reasons why teachers' unions exist and what can happen to nontenured teachers who inadvertently anger a powerful parent. Nor did we hear these administrators voice any concern that their increased reliance on private funds may eventually come back to bite them as such private fundraising becomes part of the rationale for public funding cuts in education.

These counterarguments to the positions taken by the district officials we interviewed are debatable. Certainly, there is much to be gained from

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greater flexibility in hiring teachers, and procurement laws have not always been used to benefit workers or guard the public interest. But the point we are making here is that our interviews suggest that these public school officials are not even considering these issues in their current rush to be more entrepreneurial in their approach to managing education. In other words, the more progressive democratic purposes that were to be served by regulations that helped to provide access and job security for those who lacked it are now being overlooked in the effort to assure free market democracy for those with the resources to succeed in this environment.

Making Money. And finally, in keeping with the neoliberal philosophy of winners take all, the school district officials we interviewed were not entrepreneurial for altruistic reasons. Rather, they stood to make some money for their districts by means of charter school reform. Thus the effort to make money by bringing in students from other districts was fairly consistent across the sites we studied. Although the bulk of the "extra" funds for nonresident students go to the charter schools themselves, the districts regularly take their "cut" off the top in exchange for administrative services. Furthermore, these district officials told us that this extra funding has often allowed them to buy computers and equipment for the other schools in their districts. This is, no doubt, good for the schools and students in these small, homogeneous, and relatively privileged school districts. But it was often more problematic for neighboring districts, which were not always wealthy or predominantly White. And when the charter schools required contracts making parent involvement mandatory for students admitted to the schools—not an unusual practice—it raised other issues as well, about which schools serving which students should have access to which resources (see UCLA Charter School Study, 1998).

In one of these small districts with several charter schools, including one very large home-schooling and independent study program that enrolls mostly students from other nearby school districts, the elected school board members commented on the former superintendent who had "pushed" for the charters. One board member said he could not recall exactly what was on the superintendent's mind at the time, but he thinks that the superintendent thought he could bring some of the students back to the district who had transferred out, thereby boosting enrollment and revenue.

In another suburban-rural district, the charter school legislation seemed to come along just in time as the superintendent was dealing with a budget shortfall and impending layoffs. According to a school board member, the then-superintendent was promoting charter schools, hoping that the state would eventually fund them at a higher rate. The board member remembered his saying, "You get your name on the books [with a reform effort], and then when the money comes, you get the money. . . . Let's get charter school on the books here in case something comes along and they get extra money some day, we're . . . already in the bank." The board member remem-

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bered this superintendent as "a mover and a shaker" who could sell anything to the board and the community.

Meanwhile, in the district that was part of Scott's study, with the EMO-run charter schools, the superintendent saw the charter school as an excellent fundraising tool. And because the district received a percentage of the revenue in overhead costs, he wanted the school to raise as much money as it could. In fact, when he was interviewed, he said he was going over to the charter school later in the week to meet with some prospective private donors who were touring the school. He said, "So, I go over and schmooze the group and say all the right things, and try and get them to give us money."

Conclusion and Implications

For the most part, charter school reform seems to have gracefully entered the landscape of these suburban-rural school districts. Here, where most of the districts are more racially, politically, and perhaps culturally homogeneous than the urban districts we studied, charter school reform is far less likely to be contested—at least in its initial, implementation stage (Oliver, 2001).

To the extent that the people with political, economic, and social capital within these districts uniformly support charter schools and in fact see them as a logical extension of how they make sense of their postindustrial venture-capital worlds, the only vocal, visible, or organized resistance seems to come from the local teachers and classified unions, which do not fit into the ideology of suburbia and its flexible accumulation.

What lessons of democracy then can we learn from these districts and their officials? Clearly, we learn that Chubb and Moe (1990) ignored some fairly critical issues in terms of the multiple meanings of democracy when they articulated and perpetuated a false dichotomy between "democracy" and the "market." Indeed, a more careful examination of the reform rhetoric, even that used by public education officials themselves, demonstrates that for many people (historically and perhaps for a growing number of people today), free markets and the liberties guaranteed by democracy are one and the same—mutually reinforcing concepts in a capitalist society.

Such an analysis of neoliberal rhetoric and its use of liberal democratic theory is instructive, even if it is somewhat depressing for those of us who envision a different democratic purpose for education. Nevertheless, advocates of progressive, communitarian, deliberative, and radical democracy can use the information presented in this article to help them articulate a new commonsense understanding of democracy as separate from—or at least more independent of—the free market.

In this process, we must not forget, as Apple (1996) has pointed out, that we should take seriously some of the neoliberals' criticisms of government. In particular, we must remember the connections between "resources, power, institutional interests, failure, and hence, continued bureaucratization and expansion" (p. 8).

Charter school reform is in part a response to these failings. Yet it brings with it a hegemony all its own. In their enthusiasm, neoliberal charter school

proponents are quick to universally label school districts as the enemy—as bureaucratic and nonresponsive institutions that have outlived their usefulness in a postindustrial society. Districts have too often become, in charter school discourse, the "blob" from which entrepreneurial charter reformers must run. District officials, such as those whom we studied, are, in Chubb and Moe's (1990) eyes, the defenders of an inefficient democratically governed public educational system—they are the square bureaucrats in contrast to the far more hip free-market believers.

Yet because school district officials and charter schools do not exist in isolation but are embedded in larger social structures and local political realities, the challenge for educational researchers is to look beyond the political rhetoric to the actual lived experiences of the policymakers, educators, parents, and students who are struggling to reconceptualize the role of education in an age of global capitalism. What we have seen is that, particularly in the suburban and suburban-rural communities, school district officials are often nearly as neoliberal as their critics. If nothing else, this helps us to understand just how hegemonic neoliberalism and the understanding of democracy as a means to liberty—as opposed to equality—are in our global capitalist society.

Changing this common sense will not be easy. But we must begin by creating public debate and dialogue about alternative democratic visions. For instance, Saltman (2000) describes a "radical democratic theory" of school choice that both refuses the individualizing tendencies of liberal democracy and rejects the assumption of a singular "common good" within the public schools. In fact, Saltman argues:

> Drawing on radical democracy, we can compose a double question: First, a theory of school choice would need to grapple with the political economic question of who controls the means of production and, second, the cultural-linguistic related question of who controls the means of identification production. . . . Any meaningful democratic theory of school choice must grapple with the issues of radically redistributing to the people the control of capital and the control of identification production (meaning-making technologies). (p. 52)

In considering alternatives to the liberal and free-market democracy that drives so much of how we come to understand public education today, Saltman's radical democracy may appeal to parents and advocates who have been disadvantaged in both the traditional public schools and the more recent market-based systems. Under such a framework, Saltman claims, school choice policies would foster difference while limiting identifications that are at odds with democracy. He argues that radical democracy allows us to conceive of different individuals and groups struggling for equality to join together to create a new kind of political community, a place where "the society and the subject" can be reconfigured (p. 50).

Such a vision of democracy and educational policy would help us to reconfigure the notion of "freedom" as something more than satisfying one's market desires and more than doing what one pleases. It requires real

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chances to formulate more meaningful choices—not just for individuals but also for the "democratic" society as a whole. As Apple (2001) notes, such meaningful choices have been effectively denied too many of our fellow citizens for too long (p. 15).

Still, Giroux (2002) questions the meaning of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, on our understanding of democracy. He argues that the very notion of what constitutes a just society is in flux, "betrayed in part by the legacy and language of a commercial culture that collapses the imperatives of a market economy and the demands of a democratic society, and a present that makes humanitarian and political goals a footnote to military goals." He notes then that rather than viewing the current crisis as a break from the past, "it is crucial for educators and others to begin to understand how the past might be useful in addressing what it means to live in a democracy in the aftermath of September 11."

Notes

[1] We use the term "suburban-rural" because we found that many of the formerly "rural" areas of California, even in the central valley, are adjacent to suburban developments. Thus none of the districts we studied remained completely rural.

[2] We realize that it is difficult to discuss "neoliberalism" in the U.S. context because of the traditional use of the term "liberal" in this country to describe supporters of more and not less government intervention and activism, as opposed to libertarians or free-market advocates. Indeed, this has been the case in the United States since the 1920s, when progressive writers began to use the word "liberalism" as a substitute for "progressivism." This terminology was reinforced by FDR, who, during the New Deal era, declared that liberalism was "plain English for a changed concept of the duty and responsibility of government toward economic life" (see Yergin and Stanislaw, 1998, p. 15).

Meanwhile, in most other parts of the world "liberalism" means the exact opposite—market liberalism, meaning a reduced role for the state, economic freedom, and reliance on market forces, not on government intervention, to achieve the greater good. Thus the cross-national use of the term "neoliberalism" or neoliberal ideology to describe a strong return of the antigovernment and free market arguments is often confusing to U.S. audiences (see Giddens, 1994). Although we too recognize this political shift, we generally lack the vocabulary needed to describe it. Korten (1995) notes that in countries such as the United States, where neoliberalism is pervasive but lacks a generally recognized name, "it goes undebated—its underlying assumptions unexamined" (p. 72).

[3] The central research questions that guided our study were as follows:

1. *How do people make meaning of charter school reform from different social, political, and economic standpoints?* This question explores why people engage in charter school reform and what they hope to change as a result. Conversely, it also probes why some people choose not to become involved in charter school reform and why they resist the efforts of others to do so.

2. *How do various meanings of charter reform relate to, interact with, shape, and become shaped by the lived experiences of founders, educators, parents, policymakers, and students?* This question explores these ideas from many different perspectives, including policymakers' assumptions about charter school reform, the hopes and dreams of educators, and the values and beliefs of parents and community members. It also examines how these assumptions, hopes, and beliefs relate to curricular focuses, instructional practices, and leadership styles within charter schools.

[4] Our goal in conducting qualitative case studies of school districts and their charter schools was to understand how a seemingly straightforward policy such as charter school reform interacts with various local communities. Our purpose, therefore, was *not* to study

a random sample of charter schools and then generalize our findings to all of the schools in the state. Rather, given that we know that charter schools are located in diverse communities, our intent was to purposefully sample districts and schools on the basis of their diversity in relation to each other. In other words, rather than use random sampling techniques employed by quantitative survey researchers, we sampled on the basis of the phenomenon that we wanted to study—namely, the diversity of experiences within the charter school movement (see Merriam, 1998).

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