

Neoliberalism and the Reframing of Public Education: A Historical and Political Analysis

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Introduction

In recent years, public education in the United States has faced sustained political and ideological challenges from actors who no longer uniformly regard it as a public good. As early as *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (1973), the Supreme Court determined that education is not a fundamental right under the Constitution. This position has shaped subsequent policy debates. Contemporary efforts to reform education—often framed in terms of accountability, choice, and efficiency—reflect a broader shift in how public schooling is understood and justified. These developments are not confined to a single political tradition but emerge across partisan lines, signaling a deeper transformation in the role and purpose of public education.

This article argues that neoliberalism has fundamentally reshaped public education by reframing it from a democratic public good to a market-oriented enterprise that privileges individualism, competition, and private-sector influence. Using a historical and political analysis of educational policy developments and scholarly literature, this study examines how neoliberal reforms—including high-stakes testing, school choice initiatives, and the corporatization of schooling—have altered both the structure and purpose of public education. In doing so, it contributes to scholarship on social foundations by demonstrating how these shifts have intensified educational inequities while narrowing the democratic aims historically associated with public schooling.

Neoliberalism

What is neoliberalism? Neoliberalism is an ideology and a set of policies that privilege market strategies over public institutions to address social issues (Kumashiro, 2008). Such policies champion privatizing former public services, deregulating trade, and increasing efficiency while simultaneously reducing wages, deunionizing, and slashing public services (Martinez & Garcia, 2000; Tabb, 2001). Neoliberalism defends the rights of the individual and uses the ideology of individual choice to promote the idea of meritocracy, “that presumes an even playing field” (Kumashiro, 2008, p.37).

Spire (2025) described neoliberalism as a broad term that encompasses an ideology, an economic theory, a set of discourses, a political position, and a practice. The term is generally associated with the writings of Milton Friedman (1962) and Friedrich Hayek (1944) who were proponents of a puritanical free-market economic approach, privatization of all aspects of human sociality, reduction in the role of government to the barest essentials, emphasis on the individual over collective and community social forms and the use of competition to improve, among other things, education (Brown, 2019).

Harvey (2005) defined neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p.2). Neoliberalism reworks liberalism to support global capitalist expansion (Torres, 2002; Sleeter, 2008).

Across the different ways neoliberalism can be defined or described, one consistency is that it is an economic theory that reduces the role of government in favor of private companies and individuals. According to Brown (2017), neoliberal economic theory emphasizes minimizing government's role (i.e., extreme deregulation) to maximize the free market's ability to run its course (Friedman, 1962). The underlying logic of neoliberal economic theory is that market competition should lead to progress and innovation. According to neoliberals, the state should enable, rather than constrain, private-sector influence (Baltodano, 2012). This is the logic, then, of the state actively enabling private-sector influence and competition in public schools (Baltodano, 2012; Brown, 2017, p.185).

Conceptualizing Neoliberalism

In this article, neoliberalism is understood as a multidimensional construct that operates across ideology, policy, and governance. First, as an ideology, neoliberalism emphasizes individual responsibility, market rationality, and the presumed efficiency of competition. Second, as a policy regime, it is reflected in reforms that promote privatization, deregulation, standardization, and accountability measures within public institutions. Third, as a form of governmentality, neoliberalism shapes how individuals and institutions understand their roles, encouraging subjects to view themselves as entrepreneurial actors responsible for their own success or failure. Distinguishing among these dimensions clarifies how neoliberalism simultaneously functions as a set of ideas, a collection of policy tools, and a framework for organizing social life, particularly within public education.

History of Neoliberalism

Steger & Roy (2010) stated that although neoliberalism comes in several varieties, one can find the first systematic formulation of its economic principles in the Mont Pelerin Society. Founded in 1947 by Friedrich August von Hayek, an influential member of the early 20th-century Austrian School of Economics, the society attracted like-minded intellectuals committed to strengthening the principles and practice of a 'free society' by studying the workings and virtues of market-oriented economic systems. Hayek considered most forms of state intervention in the economy as ominous milestones on the 'road to serfdom', leading to new forms of government-engineered despotism.

One difficulty in providing a history of neoliberalism is that it has emerged at different times and in various guises over the last 30 years. Davies and Bansel (2007) identified countries that are only now experiencing the first pressures towards neoliberalism (Chile), while others have adopted it only in part (Sweden). Meanwhile, some have deliberately and thoroughly implemented neoliberal practices and principles over the last 20-30 years (Australia and New Zealand) (p.250). Neoliberalism as a form of governmentality first emerged in the 1970s in response to some of the more radical and progressive positions being taken in education and the media at the time. At this time, democracies were beginning to be seen by some of those in the world of high finance as ungovernable. Research was commissioned to diagnose the problems and seek solutions. The Report on Governability by Crozier et al. (1975) argued that democratic citizens must be made both more governable and more able to serve capital (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

Those who advocate neoliberalism oppose Keynesian economics. Keynes, in particular, advocated massive government spending during an economic crisis to create new jobs and boost consumer spending. The political applications of Keynesian ideas inspired what some economists called the golden age of controlled capitalism, which lasted roughly from 1945 to 1975. The American New Deal and Great Society programs spearheaded by FDR and President Lyndon Johnson, the much-admired model of Swedish social democracy, and the British version of welfarism launched in 1945, reflected a broad political consensus among Western nations that led some pundits to proclaim the "end of ideology." (Steger & Roy, 2010, p.4).

When the Keynesian economic system of the 1960s and 70s was seen to be working well, Western governments invested in social institutions that would improve human capital, such as education and health. Education was one of the central means by which the quality of capital and labor was to be improved. The generous funding of educational institutions during this period was based on the belief that knowledge and education were valuable to the state and society for defense and for ensuring that all members of society could participate and contribute. (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p.254).

Due to the economic malaise of the 1970s, the apparent failure of Keynesian economics was presented as justification for widespread, radical changes. Davies & Bansel(2007) argued elsewhere:

The inflationary crisis was an opportunity for classical liberal theorists, most influentially Hayek and Friedman, to regain dominance. In the US, it gave Carter (and, later, Reagan) had the opportunity to (re)vitalize the discourses of (neo)liberal economics (Tabb, 1980). In this new order, big business once again gained the upper hand, workers' wages and conditions were reined in, and the global market dominated government decision-making (Davies et al., 2006) (p.250).

The Move Towards Neoliberalism

Neoliberal policy reforms in education have taken shape through a combination of legislative mandates, accountability systems, and market-oriented restructuring. Within this policy landscape, reforms such as school choice initiatives, charter schools, and high-stakes testing have challenged the legitimacy of public schooling by reframing it in terms of competition, efficiency, and individual responsibility (Chapman, 2018; Lipman, 2005; O'Neal & Bridgeforth, 2025; Picower, 2011). Rather than addressing structural inequities, these policies often shift responsibility onto students, teachers, and families through accountability mechanisms that emphasize performance metrics over systemic conditions (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001; Hall & Pulsford, 2019; Hursh, 2007; O'Neal & Bridgeforth, 2025).

Central to these reforms is the expansion of high-stakes standardized testing as a mechanism for evaluating students, teachers, and schools. Proponents argue that such measures provide accountability and transparency within public education systems. However, critics have demonstrated that these policies frequently narrow curricular focus, constrain teacher autonomy, and reinforce existing inequalities by disproportionately penalizing under-resourced schools (Au, 2016; Lipman, 2011; Lipman, 2013). In this way, testing regimes operate not only as assessment tools but also as instruments of policy enforcement, aligning educational practices with broader market-based logics.

The growth of school choice policies, particularly charter schools and voucher programs, illustrates the shift toward market-oriented approaches. These reforms are often justified as expanding opportunities for families dissatisfied with traditional public schools. Empirical findings on their effectiveness, however, remain mixed. While some charter schools have demonstrated improved outcomes in specific contexts, broader analyses indicate that many perform comparably to, or in some cases worse than, their public school counterparts (CREDO,

2013; Horn, 2014). These inconsistencies underscore the need to evaluate such policies not only in terms of access, but also in terms of equity and long-term outcomes.

Federal policy interventions have played a significant role in advancing neoliberal reforms. The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) and the *Race to the Top* (RTT) initiative exemplify how accountability systems and conditional funding structures incentivized states to adopt standardized testing regimes and curriculum alignment. These policies tied financial support to measurable performance outcomes, effectively compelling schools and districts to conform to externally defined benchmarks. As a result, authority over curriculum and instructional practices has increasingly shifted away from local educators toward state agencies, private organizations, and testing corporations (Au, 2016; Horn, 2014; Mallinson & Lovell, 2022; Ydsen & Dunn, 2022).

Taken together, these developments reflect a broader transformation in the governance of public education, where market principles increasingly structure policy decisions and institutional practices. While framed as mechanisms for improving quality and expanding opportunity, neoliberal reforms often reconfigure educational systems in ways that prioritize competition and efficiency over democratic participation and equity. This shift illustrates how neoliberalism operates not only through discrete policies but through a redefinition of what public education is and what it is intended to achieve.

Impact on Education and Schools

Neoliberalism has not only reshaped educational policy but has also reconfigured the purposes of schooling and the forms of subjectivity that education seeks to produce. Within this framework, individuals are increasingly understood as entrepreneurial actors responsible for managing their own success in competitive environments. As Davies and Bansel (2007) suggested, neoliberal governance encourages the production of “responsibilized” (p.248) subjects who are expected to navigate social and economic conditions through individual effort rather than collective support. Schools and universities, in this context, become central sites for cultivating these dispositions, aligning educational practices with broader economic priorities.

This shift corresponded with a broader transformation from what has been described as the “social state” to the “enabling state,” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p.251) in which responsibility for social well-being is redistributed from public institutions to individuals. Rather than ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities, the state increasingly positions itself as a facilitator of individual advancement, expecting students, families, educators, and institutions to assume responsibility for educational outcomes. Within education, this transformation manifests in policies that emphasize accountability, performance, and self-regulation as core indicators of success.

The competitive logics embedded in neoliberal reform further shape how schools are evaluated and how resources are distributed. As schools compete for funding, enrollment, and performance rankings, inequalities between institutions are often intensified. Research suggests that such competition disproportionately advantages schools with greater access to social and economic capital, while under-resourced schools face increased pressure to meet standardized benchmarks with fewer supports (Brown, 2017; Oliver, 2022). In this environment, the success of some schools is frequently tied to the structural disadvantage of others, raising important questions about the compatibility of market competition with educational equity.

Empirical research has also called into question the broader effectiveness of neoliberal reforms in improving educational outcomes. While policies such as high-stakes testing and accountability systems are intended to raise achievement, evidence suggests that they have not consistently produced improvements in overall test scores or reduced longstanding disparities related to race and class (Au, 2016; National Research Council, 2011). Scholars such as Ladson-Billings (2006) argued that persistent inequities in educational outcomes are rooted in structural and historical conditions rather than individual performance, challenging narratives that attribute disparities primarily to student effort or school quality.

In addition to shaping outcomes, neoliberal policies influence the content and structure of curriculum and instruction. The expansion of standardized testing has been accompanied by the increased use of prescribed curricula aligned with state standards and accountability measures. In many cases, these curricula limit teacher autonomy and constrain opportunities for critical or contextually responsive pedagogy, particularly in schools serving historically marginalized communities (Horn, 2014; Hoyt et al., 2022; Narayanan et al., 2014; Sleeter, 2008). Such developments raise concerns about the narrowing of educational experiences and the diminished capacity of schools to engage students in broader social, historical, and democratic inquiry.

The regulation of curriculum also extends into broader political debates over what knowledge is considered legitimate or appropriate for schools. Recent policy efforts aimed at restricting the teaching of topics related to race, inequality, and historical injustice illustrate how educational content can become a site of political contestation. These interventions reflect ongoing struggles over national identity, historical interpretation, and the role of education in fostering critical engagement with social issues.

Taken together, these developments suggest that neoliberalism operates not only through policy mechanisms but also through the redefinition of educational purposes and practices. By prioritizing individual responsibility, competition, and market-based accountability, neoliberal reforms reshape how success is defined within education and who is held accountable for achieving it. In doing so, they raise significant questions about the capacity of public education to fulfill its democratic role in promoting equity, critical engagement, and collective well-being.

Charter Schools, Vouchers, and Choice

One of the central expressions of neoliberal reform in education is the expansion of school choice policies, including charter schools and voucher programs. These initiatives are often framed as mechanisms for increasing educational opportunity, particularly for families dissatisfied with traditional public schools. In policy discourse, choice is positioned as a means of fostering competition, improving school performance, and empowering parents to select educational environments that align with their children's needs (Boyd, 2007; Hall & Pulsford, 2019; Lakes & Carter, 2011; O'Neal & Bridgeforth, 2025; Sleeter, 2008; Standford, 2023).

Charter schools, in particular, have been described as operating at the boundary between public and private education, combining public funding with varying degrees of private management and autonomy (Au, 2016; Boyd, 2007). Their rapid expansion reflects broader efforts to introduce market dynamics into public education systems. While charter schools are often promoted as innovative alternatives to traditional public schools, research on their effectiveness presents a complex picture. Some studies indicate improved outcomes in specific contexts, particularly in urban settings, while others find no significant differences—or even negative outcomes—when compared to district schools, not to mention the financial mismanagement of some of the largest charter school districts in Oklahoma (EPIC) and Texas (IDEA) (CREDO, 2013; Horn, 2014; Martinez-Keel, 2025; Miron et al., 2010; Oklahoma Statewide Charter School Board (OSCSB), 2026; Ravitch, 2024). These mixed findings highlight the importance of evaluating charter schools not only in terms of access and choice, but also in relation to equity, accountability, and long-term sustainability.

Voucher programs similarly reflect neoliberal priorities by redirecting public funds toward private educational options. Advocates argue that vouchers provide critical opportunities for students in underperforming schools to access higher-quality education. However, critics contend that such programs may contribute to the erosion of public school systems by diverting resources away from already underfunded institutions, while disproportionately benefiting families with greater access to information and mobility (Harvey, 2005; Sleeter, 2008). In this context, the expansion of vouchers raises important questions about the role of public funding, the distribution of educational opportunity, and the long-term viability of public education as a collective institution.

The growing influence of philanthropic organizations, policy entrepreneurs, and corporate actors further reflects the restructuring of educational governance under neoliberalism. Wealthy individuals and foundations have played a significant role in promoting school choice policies and shaping reform agendas at both federal and local levels (Au & Lubienski, 2016; Barkan, 2011). While such involvement is often justified as a means of introducing innovation and resources into public education, it also raises concerns about democratic accountability and the concentration of decision-making power in unelected entities (Ravitch, 2013).

Importantly, support for school choice policies is not limited to policymakers or private actors. In some historically underserved communities, these reforms are viewed as offering potential solutions to longstanding inequalities in educational access and quality (Sleeter, 2008). However, over time, evidence suggests that market-based reforms tend to reproduce or exacerbate existing disparities, as competition for resources and students benefits schools and communities with greater social and economic capital (Harvey, 2005).

Taken together, charter schools, voucher programs, and related choice initiatives illustrate how neoliberal reforms reshape public education by prioritizing market mechanisms over collective provision. Although framed as expanding opportunity and improving quality, these policies often reconfigure education as a competitive marketplace, raising critical questions about equity, access, and the democratic purposes of schooling.

Teacher Preparation Programs

The influence of neoliberalism extends beyond K–12 schooling into the structure and purpose of teacher preparation programs themselves. As broader educational reforms increasingly emphasize accountability, efficiency, and measurable outcomes, teacher education has come under intensified scrutiny regarding its effectiveness and relevance. Critiques from both within and outside the field often focus on issues such as perceived disconnections from classroom practice, lack of curricular coherence, and insufficient quality control (Levine, 2006; Sleeter, 2008). While these critiques are frequently framed as efforts to strengthen teacher preparation, they are also embedded within larger political and economic shifts that seek to redefine teaching as a technical rather than professional practice.

Within a neoliberal policy context, teaching is increasingly positioned as a form of labor that can be standardized, measured, and optimized according to market principles. This shift is reflected in efforts to redefine teacher quality in terms of testable content knowledge and student performance outcomes, rather than professional judgment, pedagogical expertise, or commitments to equity (Sleeter, 2008). As a result, teacher preparation programs face pressure to align their curricula with state standards, accountability systems, and external assessments, often narrowing the scope of what constitutes effective teaching.

Alternative certification pathways provide a clear example of this transformation. Programs such as Teach For America (TFA) have emerged as influential actors in the teacher labor market, promoting models of teacher recruitment and preparation that prioritize efficiency and rapid classroom entry (Gale de Saxe et al., 2020; Horn, 2014). While such programs are often justified as responses to teacher shortages—particularly in high-need schools, they also challenge the centrality of university-based teacher education by suggesting that extensive pedagogical training is not necessary for effective teaching (Horn, 2014; Sommer, 2014). In

doing so, they contribute to the broader deprofessionalization of teaching by positioning it as a short-term service activity rather than a sustained professional commitment.

Neoliberal pressures have also shaped how teacher education programs conceptualize diversity, equity, and community engagement. For example, Perkins (2025) alludes to initiatives such as *Grow Your Own* (GYO) programs, which have been promoted as strategies for recruiting teachers from local and historically underrepresented communities. Although such programs hold potential to increase representation and strengthen connections between schools and communities, research suggests that their impact may be constrained when they operate within policy environments that prioritize standardized outcomes and market-driven efficiency over culturally responsive and socially grounded approaches to teaching.

These developments reflect a broader restructuring of teacher education in which programs are increasingly expected to produce educators who can operate effectively within highly regulated, performance-oriented systems. In this context, teacher candidates are often prepared to implement prescribed curricula, meet standardized benchmarks, and respond to accountability pressures, rather than to engage critically with educational inequities or contribute to the democratic aims of schooling.

Taken together, the transformation of teacher preparation programs under neoliberalism highlights the extent to which market-based reforms reshape not only educational policy but also the formation of educators themselves. These shifts raise significant questions about the future of teaching as a profession and about the capacity of teacher education programs to prepare educators who can advance equity, exercise professional judgment, and support the democratic purposes of public education.

Resistance and Counter Movements

Whereas this pressure to conform to neoliberal policies, teachers are clearly creating identities of resistance to neoliberal reforms in the United States and globally (Au, 2016; Brown, 2017; Costigan, 2013; Dovemark, 2010; Duarte & Brewer, 2022; Huff, 2013; Picower, 2011; Vassallo, 2013; Webb et al., 2009), many scholars also note teachers' internal dissonance as they attempt to teach for social justice or equity within a consistently more inequitable, commodified and marketized environment. Webb et al. (2009) argue that some teachers, to resist what they deem the "neoliberal panopticon" (Brown, 2017, p.188), engage in certain kinds of fabrications or performative pedagogies that allow them to operate using two types of scripts – one to meet standards when supervised and another to resist neoliberal reforms. While not ideal, they state, the kind of ideological schizophrenia that results is a necessary alternative to complacency, given the reality.

In the Picower (2011) study, participants found themselves in environments characterized by fear, compliance, and pressure to conform; the teachers employed four strategies to implement their critical pedagogy. First, they worked collectively to build a haven that protected

their social justice pedagogy by participating in the Critical Inquiry Project (CIP) The CIP was used to collect data from new teachers in urban schools). The program provided new teachers with a space to develop their curricula and devise strategies to defend themselves against unsupportive colleagues. Second, they camouflaged their social justice pedagogy within their classrooms by integrating it into the mandated curriculum and substituting alternative materials to keep their work under the radar. Third, they gave their students opportunities to become critically aware of larger systems of inequity by teaching them the tools they needed to engage in activism themselves. Fourth, in a few instances, the teachers went public with their work by openly rejecting school policies or speaking out about their pedagogy.

Resistance to these neoliberal policies often aims to challenge these inequalities in the name of social justice. In the test boycotts in the US, teachers, parents, and students have resisted testing policies they feel have damaged their schools and the public education system more generally. Further, the test resistance is fundamentally an assertion of autonomy against state-sanctioned control of education, since the tests have become the lever for imposing free-market reforms on schools and communities (Au, 2016). In addition to resistance to high-stakes testing, there should also be strategies, such as creating critical inquiry projects focused on social justice education, that give them space to transition into the profession while remaining connected to the goals with which they entered (Duncan-Andrade, 2005; Picower, 2007). By providing opportunities for teachers to build and sustain safe havens and connect with broader movements for social justice, teacher educators can help our graduates not only survive in the profession but also challenge the larger neoliberal forces waging war for control of public education (Picower, 2011).

Conclusion

Neoliberal reforms in education are often justified on the grounds that competition, accountability, and market responsiveness will improve school quality and better prepare students for participation in a global economy. Proponents of these reforms argue that exposure to competitive environments encourages innovation and fosters individual responsibility (Brown, 2017; Au, 2016). While these claims have shaped policy discourse over the past several decades, the evidence presented in this analysis suggests that such reforms produce uneven outcomes and raise important concerns about equity and the broader purposes of public education (Au, 2016; Lipman, 2011, 2013).

This essay has argued that neoliberalism has reshaped public education by reframing it from a democratic public good into a market-oriented enterprise. Through a historical and political analysis of policy developments and scholarly literature, the study has demonstrated how reforms centered on privatization, standardization, and accountability have altered not only educational structures, but also the assumptions underlying schooling itself (Harvey, 2005; Sleeter, 2008; Torres, 2002). In particular, these reforms reconfigure relationships between the

state, schools, and individuals, shifting responsibility for educational success away from public institutions and toward students, families, and educators (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

This analysis contributes to social foundations scholarship by synthesizing historical and contemporary critiques of neoliberalism to highlight its impact on educational equity, governance, and subject formation. Rather than treating neoliberal reforms as discrete policy initiatives, the article illustrates how they function as part of a broader ideological and institutional transformation that reshapes what education is expected to accomplish and who is held accountable for its outcomes (Brown, 2017; Apple, 2006; Au & Ferrare, 2015). This essay offers a historically grounded synthesis that connects neoliberal policy reforms to transformations in subject formation and democratic purpose within public education. In doing so, it provides a framework for understanding how market-based reforms influence not only policy decisions but also the lived realities of schools, teachers, and students.

The findings also carry important implications for teacher education programs. As these programs operate within increasingly market-driven and accountability-oriented policy environments, they face pressures to prioritize standardization, efficiency, and measurable outcomes over professional judgment, critical inquiry, and commitments to equity (Sleeter, 2008; Horn, 2014). Preparing teachers to navigate these tensions requires a renewed emphasis on the social, historical, and political dimensions of education, as well as support for pedagogical approaches that address inequality and democratic participation (Picower, 2011).

More broadly, the expansion of neoliberal reforms raises significant questions for democratic theory and practice. Public education has historically been understood as a foundational institution for fostering civic participation, collective responsibility, and social cohesion. As market principles increasingly shape educational policy and practice, schools' capacity to serve these functions may be constrained (Giroux, 2014; Ravitch, 2013). This shift suggests the need to reconsider how democratic purposes are defined within contemporary education systems and the extent to which current policy trajectories support or undermine those aims.

Future research should continue to examine the varied and context-specific effects of neoliberal reforms, particularly in relation to race, class, and access to educational opportunity. Evidence suggests that persistent disparities are rooted in structural inequalities rather than individual performance alone, reinforcing the need for analyses that attend to historical and systemic conditions (Ladson-Billings, 2006; O'Neal & Bridgeforth, 2025). By situating neoliberalism within broader historical and political contexts, scholars and practitioners can better assess its implications and identify alternative approaches that more fully support equity, professional autonomy, and the democratic purposes of public education.

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