Future Imaginaries of Urban School Reform

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Abstract: Drawing on analytic heuristics from critical discourse analysis and cultural political economy (Jessop, 2010; Wodak, 2002), this article examines the temporal premises and "futures" embedded in a report and reform proposal created in a mid-sized, American city, Columbus, Ohio, in 2013. The product of a city-wide commission appointed in response to a school 'cheating' scandal, the report is both a condensation of key premises and claims circulating through national education policy discourses, and an effort to fit those ideas to a particular urban locale. This fitting involves aligning the city with a particular neoliberal representation or "imaginary" of the future that pervades current education policy discourse and planning. The article unpacks the temporal premises associated with this imaginary and shows their influence on the city's planning. Among other things, the discourse individuates scholastic time and subordinates the present to a distant future that is represented as an already-known or predictable state of affairs. It positions practices such as standardized testing as temporal technologies for predicting the child's position in the imagined future, and reframes racially- and class-based inequalities as differences in the kinds of futures towards which groups are oriented. The effect is to overwrite political questions of what kind of future we might want to create with technical questions of how best to prepare for an inevitable future we can't avoid.
Keywords*: Time; policy discourse; neoliberalism; imaginaries; urban policy

Imaginarios futuros de reformas escolares urbanas
Resumen: Partiendo de la heurística analíticas de el análisis del discurso crítico y la economía político-cultural (Jessop, 2010; Wodak, 2002), este artículo examina las dimensiones temporales y "futuros" incorporados en un informe y propuesta de reforma creada en una ciudad estadounidense de tamaño medio, Columbus, Ohio, en 2013. El producto de una comisión con representantes de toda la ciudad y nombrado en respuesta a un escándalo de fraude escolar, el informe es a la vez una condensación de las demandas que circulan a través de los discursos de política educativa nacional, y un esfuerzo para adaptar esas ideas a una localidad en particular. Esta adaptación implica la alineación de la ciudad con una representación neoliberal o "imaginario" del futuro que impregna el discurso actual de política educativa y planificación. El artículo de-construye las dimensiones temporales asociadas a ese imaginario y muestra su influencia en la planificación de la ciudad. Entre otras cosas, el discurso individualiza el tiempo escolar y subordina el presente para un futuro lejano que se representa como un estado de asuntos ya conocido o previsible. Posiciona prácticas tales como las pruebas estandarizadas como las tecnologías temporales para predecir la posición de los niños en el futuro imaginado, y replantea las desigualdades raciales o de clase como las diferencias en los tipos de futuros hacia los que se orientan los grupos. El efecto es inscribir cuestiones políticas de qué tipo de futuros podríamos querer crear dentro de cuestiones técnicas como la mejor manera de prepararse para un futuro inevitable.
Palabras clave: Tiempo; discurso político; neoliberalismo; imaginarios; política urbana

Futuro imaginário de reforma da escola urbana
Resumo: Com base na heurística analítica do análise de discurso crítico e economia política-cultural (Jessop, 2010; Wodak, 2002), este artigo examina as dimensões temporais e o "futuro" incorporados a um relatório e proposta de reforma de uma cidade americana de médio porte, Columbus, Ohio, em 2013. Produto de uma comissão com representantes de toda a cidade em resposta a um escândalo de fraude acadêmica, o relatório é tanto uma condensação das demandas que circulam através de discursos de política nacional de educação, e um esforço para adaptar estas idéias a uma determinada localidade. Esta adaptação envolve o alinhamento da cidade com uma representação neoliberal de um futuro "imaginário" que permeia o discurso atual da política e planejamento educacional. O artigo desconstrói as dimensões temporais associadas ao imaginário e mostra sua influência no planejamento da cidade. Entre outras coisas, o discurso individualiza o tempo escolar subordinado o presente para um futuro distante, que é representado como um estado de assuntos conhecidos ou previsíveis. Posiciona práticas, tais como testes padronizados, como as tecnologias temporárias para prever a posição das crianças no futuro imaginado, e repensa as desigualdades e diferenças raciais e de classe como tipos de futuro para o qual os grupos se direcionam. O efeito é registrar as questões políticas do que tipo de futuro podemos querer criar como questões técnicas, e como a melhor maneira de se preparar para um futuro inevitável.
Palavras-chave: Tempo; discurso político; neoliberalismo; imaginária; política urbana

Future Imaginaries in Urban School Reform Discourse

> The recommendations included in this report are steps we can begin now,
> everywhere . . . to get our children and our city ready for the bright future that awaits

us. (*Future Ready Columbus: Assuring Student Success for the Workforce of Tomorrow.* Final Report, Columbus Education Commission, 30 April, 2013, p. 3)

The future is an operational medium for policy actors. Portraying it as inevitable, not a world to create, but one that "awaits us," shifts debate from political questions around the kinds of futures we should work towards, to technical questions of how to prepare for the one allotted to us. Policy decisions become matters of "prospective necessity" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 8), actions *required* by the future, and the present becomes preparation for what's to come.

This article uses a case study of urban school reform to examine how such futures function in the core premises of education policy. There are several aims. One is to show how the particular version of the future currently favored in American policy discourse is linked to neoliberal logics that individuate scholastic time and marginalize the city in policy-making. Another is to explicate how basic elements of national reform efforts, such as standardized testing, need to be understood in part as temporal technologies for subordinating the present to the imagined future. A third aim is to show the alignment of city-level plans with national discourses involves recasting social as temporal difference – in the case examined here, by reframing class and racial inequalities as differences in students' futures.

My empirical focus is a reform proposal created in a mid-sized, American city, Columbus, Ohio, in 2013. Revelations that Columbus officials had falsified student data to improve ratings forced the resignations of a number of school administrators, including the long-serving superintendent, and led to criminal investigations and threats of state intervention[1]. This destabilization of the existing governance structure, in which authority rested in an elected school board and a strong superintendent, created a moment of opportunity for the Mayor and city's business community to claim direct control over education issues. Realizing that opportunity, however, meant getting voter approval for the change – what one might call the infra-policy work of creating the conditions of possibility for policy implementation. In this case, the problem was less to convince voters that school reform was needed, than to convince them that a new centralized governance regime was required to direct that reform.

The Mayor and City Council president went about this by creating a "Columbus Education Commission" (CEC), and charging it with developing a plan that would "enable all of our children to succeed in the city's vibrant, growing economy," make the city "a global leader in developing the highly skilled, creative, entrepreneurial workforce that will propel economic growth in the 21st Century," and "leverage the resourcefulness of our entire community to meet these goals."[2]

Such commissions can be understood as devices that allow local elites – and most of the CEC's 25 members were presidents or vice-presidents of local banks and non-profits – to control the definition of public issues and possible responses to them (Holland et al., 2007, p. 156).[3] By

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[1] By early 2013 the state legislature was considering school-takeover legislation for Columbus (Bush & Siegel, 2013, April 17), a move that would reduce local power rather than centralize in the hands of the city elite. The plan analyzed here can be read in part as an effort to forestall such an incursion.

[2] The elected School Board voiced its objections to the Commission, putting forward a resolution asking the Commission to clarify its aims, and reasserting its own legal authority over school governance, as well as the rights of citizens to "democratically elect the leaders of its school district." This had no impact on the Commission process.

[3] The work of commissions and task forces changes with political context. A 1968 'Columbus Education Commission' relied mainly on the testimony of city residents in contrast to the 2013 Commission's emphasis on national experts. It focused on "equality of opportunity," whereas the word "equality" does not appear in the 2013 Report.

staging information spectacles around the public testimony of community members and national experts, they also allow city leaders to present the resulting proposals as the products of inclusive processes. The CEC was careful thus to explain that it had:

> gathered input from nearly 60 local and national experts; reviewed dozens of research reports, articles and books; made seven school visits; conducted 17 public events such as community forums for neighborhood residents, parents, teachers, young professionals and cultural groups; and sought community generated education-improvement ideas using television advertising, social media and a postcard campaign. (CEC, 2013, p. 17)

The Commission's 107-page Final Report – *Future Ready Columbus: Assuring Student Success for the Workforce of Tomorrow* (CEC, 2013) – provides the material on which most of the analysis below is based. Such reports symbolize a "search for the truth" (Ashforth, 1990, p. 9), combining "expert" testimony with narratives of risk and problematizing comparisons, to legitimize proposed change agendas. In passages such as the one below, for example, the CEC points to cities around the country that are better prepared for, or moving faster towards the future than Columbus, and links their advances to the use of "new digital technologies." An expert identified through affiliations with technology-linked foundations and firms is then used to explicitly cited to buttress the claim that digitization is essential for breaking with the past and moving towards the future.

> From California to Maine, states and individual school districts are adopting new ways of engaging students, often through new digital capabilities that didn't exist even a few years ago. Pioneering schools like The Carpe Diem High School in Yuma, Arizona, the KIPP Empower Academy in Los Angeles, and the Long Beach, California, public school district are proving that well-structured blended learning environments and innovative teaching methods can result in better student achievement. . . . Commissioners also heard from leading experts, including Tom Vander Ark, founder of GettingSmart.com and former Executive Director of Education for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
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> Vander Ark noted that the shift taking place in education isn't simply a move from print to digital, but in the way learning happens. These changes range from greater individualization in learning plans, to how teachers teach, to where learning occurs.
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> "We built the (old) system as best we could and organized kids by birthday, and then batch processed them through the system," he said. "We're now starting to build schools that meet kids where they are." That includes the ability to change the pace of education to each individual child's ability (CEC, 2013, p. 55).

The prominence given to Vander Ark in this passage is typical of the way the Report tries to establish its "truths." A key part of a commission's work is to "scan" the national (or international) policy environment (McCann & Ward, 2010, p. 175) for tropes that can be incorporated into its own plans. Among other things, this ensures that local vocabularies, images, and narratives mesh with those of national corporate and governmental actors. As Ashforth (1990) suggests, public commission meetings are "theaters of power" in which elites try to "authorize a form of social discourse" (pp. 7, 9) – in this case, what I describe below as a "neoliberal" discourse. But they are also theaters in which the commission tries to authorize *itself* through alignment with the discourse of dominant institutions.

One key to such alignments is the presentation of findings as flowing directly from national experts such as Vander Ark. Although many of those making presentations to the CEC were from the Columbus area, the report's key assertions, like the one above, were presented and justified through reference to national "policy peddlers and gurus" (Peck & Theodore, 2010, p. 170) representing corporations, online universities, charter school networks, think tanks, venture capital firms, and technology-linked foundations (cf. Cook & Ward, 2012, p. 140; Prince, 2013, Larner & Laurie, 2010; Peck & Theodore, 2012, p. 22). The basic sections of the report are corresponding divided into subsections with the headings "What the Community Said," and "What the Research and the Experts Tell Us." The privileged role given the latter in the CEC report is suggested by the difference in verbs: "said" implying an expression of opinion, "tell" with connotations of instruction or direction – direction the Commission takes without qualification. That is, the report does not acknowledge differences among experts' claims or compare their views, but instead positions itself as a neutral conveyor of ideas, as if relaying indisputable information in "a linear process of direct knowledge transfer" (McFarlane, 2011 p. 135). The text thus piles up images and ideas without explaining, for the most part, how one fits with the others. This allows the Commission to claim the authority of all the experts it cites (and the organizations they represent), and at the same time implicitly invites those experts to acknowledge their links to the city's efforts. Vander Ark, the expert mentioned in the quotation above, thus praised the city's efforts in a blog posting, and criticized the local school governance regime those efforts were meant to displace:

> Mayor Michael Coleman is spending his political capital trying to give Columbus kids a shot. "The mayor and business community want to affect HUGE changes in Columbus education," said a veteran Ohio observer. . . It's great to see so much community support for better student outcomes in Columbus but odd and sad to see the district largely missing in action (Vander Ark, 2013a).

There is no suggestion in the Report (or the discourse it draws on) that consultant-experts need to know or learn anything about the local setting, or that the ideas or models they advance might need modification to work in Columbus. Rather, the implication is that the city and its schools must change to fit themselves to the experts' ideas. The CEC Report is less a critical synthesis, then, than a kind of third-party ventriloquy in which the city is made to speak at times with the voices of national experts, and thereby demonstrate its alignment with the neoliberal discourse and future imaginary they articulate.

Discourse, Neoliberalism, and the Imaginary

These terms, discourse, neoliberalism, and imaginary, require explanation. All are ambiguous. "The imaginary" is been defined in radically different ways (e.g., Castoriadis, 1987; Graeber, 2007; Taylor, 2002), "discourse" has multiple, "fluctuating" meanings (Foucault, 1972, p. 80), and "neoliberalism," most agree, is a doctrine that "morphs" and "mutates" over time (Brown, 2015, p. 48; Mirowski, 2013, p. 50).

I'll begin with the imaginary. Using a definition from critical discourse analysis, imaginaries are "representations of how things might or could or should be. . . . projections of possible states of affairs, 'possible worlds'" (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002, p. 195). One can thus speak of economic imaginaries (Jessop, 2013), urban imaginaries (e.g., Mah, 2012), educational imaginaries, and so on, each a constellation of ideas, narratives, images, or maps of a future. Their function is to provide a basis for taking actions which have otherwise unknowable consequences. Thus in Jessop's (2013) definition, an imaginary allows people to make sense of their:

> lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or guides collective
> calculation about that world.. . . Without [imaginaries], individuals cannot "go on" in
> the world and collective actors (such as organizations) could not relate to their
> environments, make decisions, or pursue more or less coherent strategies (p. 236).

More simply, people have to make decisions and take actions that have long-term consequences, but they cannot actually know or calculate what those consequences will be. The future is emergent, the unpredictable accomplishment of multiple actors operating with different assumptions and strategies, often unaware of one other, who build, destroy, and reassemble relations in evolving cultural worlds and changing material environments. The resulting "inordinate complexity" means the future "cannot be an object of effective calculation, management, governance, or guidance" (Jessop, 2013, p. 236). This uncertainty cannot be remediated by better technologies, data, or theories. We may be able to forecast the long-term direction of certain physical systems, but we cannot foretell the political, economic, and social processes that will swirl around them in that long term. We can predict a pattern of global warming, for example, but not how particular governments and institutions will respond to it decades hence. As Keynes (1937) put it, "about these matters there is no scientific basis on which to form any calculable probability whatever. We simply do not know" (Davidson, 1995; Keynes, 1936, pp. 147-164; Keynes, 1937, pp. 213-214; Pixley, 2014; Taleb, et al., 2014, p. 4).

Since we cannot avoid making decisions with implications for such futures, especially in strongly path-dependent institutions like schooling, we need imaginaries.[4] We don't know what the world, or the job market, or the state of knowledge will be like 20 years from now, for example, but schooling decisions made now probably have implications 20 years on: Which schools should our children attend? How much energy should be put into which extra-curricular activities? What kind of technologies do we need to learn? Imaginaries provide the illusion of predictability to guide our answers, and thus fulfill a key function in education policy.

The dominant future imaginary of the current era is defined by "neoliberalism," a constellation of ideas that portrays the world as a system of economic competition among individuals (or family units), in which "economic values, practices, and metrics" are extended "to every dimension of human life," such that virtually everything can be understood in terms of individual investment and return (Brown, 2015, p. 30; cf. Mirowski, 2013; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2013). The ideas and images running through the CEC's Final Report, from first page onward, resonate with neoliberal assumptions. In the "Message to the Community" that begins the Report, for example, the Mayor and Council President warn that "not all of our children are acquiring the skills they need to succeed in school, in college or work" (CEC, 2013, p. 3) and frame the city's future fate in terms of maximizing its production of human capital: "Preparing our children for a growing and changing economy is essential to our future success as a city" (ibid). Schooling, from the city's perspective, thus becomes a matter of economic development. One of the national experts testifying to the CEC, the Mayor of Nashville, Tennessee, is described approvingly as travelling:

> across the country visiting high-performing charter schools and has helped to launch
> the Tennessee Charter School Incubator (TCSI). Mayor Dean says that "this is a lot
> like economic development, where you are trying to persuade companies to come to

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[4] By 'path-dependent' I mean that the order of in which things happen affects how they happen" (Tilly, 2002, p. 76) and "the most important effects of a given even may be 'temporally lagged'– i.e., not initially felt but clearly visible at a later point in time" (Mahoney & Schensul, 2006, p. 257).

you." For his part, he has "encouraged KIPP to expand in our community." He has
helped them raise money, provided school facilities, and personally encouraged the
expansion of teacher talent pipelines like Teach for America and The New Teacher
Project that are keys to sustained growth of high-quality charter schools in his city
(CEC, 2013, p. 64).

What is the "neoliberal imaginary" of education policy, then? An almost Manichean world divided
between winners earning credentials from 'competitive' universities and getting high-tech, high-
skilled jobs, and losers who fall behind and end up in precarious, low-paying jobs. This is an
intensified image of the world neoliberalism has been making over the past 40 years. As late as the
1970s, secondary school in the US could be taken as a normative end-point for formal education --
the level at which a student could exit the system and find stable work with good pay (e.g., Cooper,
2013; Mishel, 2013). Since then, businesses have outsourced and eliminated 'good' jobs, suppressed
private-sector unionism, and cut or flat-lined wages. The gaps between the employment, pay, and
job quality of people with college degrees and those without have consequently widened, and the
latter are increasingly pushed into precarious jobs paying poverty-level wages (Wicks-Lim, 2012;
Osterman & Shulman, 2011; Mishel, Shierholz, & Schmitt, 2013; NELP, 2014: Shierholz, Davis, &
Kimball, 2014; Casselman, 2013). Consistent with neoliberal logics, inequality "becomes legitimate,
even normative, in every sphere" (Brown, 2015, p. 64; Mirowski, 2013, p. 63).

     The standard narrative explaining this growing need for a college degree is that technology-
driven demand for better trained workers creates a "skills premium" for those with such credentials
(e.g., Autor, 2014). In neoliberal discourse, people are understood as "bundles of 'investments,' or
"skill sets," that is, as units of "human capital" (Brown, 2015, pp. 36-38; Mirowski, 2013, pp. 54-55;
Smith, 2010; Urciuoli, 2008), whose value is determined by "the market." Schooling is an economic
investment, or rather a mechanism through which individuals can "self-invest in ways that enhance
[their] value" and improve their individual, competitive position (Brown, 2015, pp. 30, 33; cf.
Mirowski, 2013; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2013). In the CEC report, notions of "citizenship"
merge with economic qualification, and students' futures are reduced to their post-school economic
"potential":

     Failure to prepare our citizens carries with it staggering costs to individuals,
     communities and the state's economy. Those without high school diplomas or post-
     secondary credentials or degrees experience decreased purchasing power, and the
     local economy does not enjoy the full potential that comes from successful adults
     buying homes, cars and paying more taxes (CEC, 2013, p. 16).

'Neoliberalism' is, among other things, a form of "discourse," the last of the slippery terms to be
discussed here. As Fairclough (1993) defines it, discourse is "language use conceived as social
practice" (p. 138), that is, language understood as an integral element of social life, dialectically
linked to other elements (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3). Foucault's (1972) definition of "discourses" as the
"practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 49) has been particularly
useful for policy analysis, as is his use of the term to refer not only to sets of statements, but to the
practices producing such statements, and to the institutional fields (political economy, medicine, etc.)
through which they are produced. Thus Fischer (2003) uses "discourse" to refer to the ways policy
problems are expressed and constructed (the vocabularies and narratives used, and the strategies for
producing them), as well as to the matrices of power-knowledge that privilege certain statements
while weakening others (pp. 43-46). Discourses, then, are evolving constellations of words,
narratives, institutions, organizations, and systems of expertise and accounting that shape how we

can publicly articulate and debate key issues -- like 'schooling,' 'achievement,' and 'the city.' They define what counts as legitimate knowledge, and who counts as a legitimate knower: "Discourses are about what can be said . . . but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority" (Ball, 1994, p. 21).

I use discourse in what follows to refer to statements in the CEC Report, to the logics (such as neoliberalism) embedded in and animated through those statements, and in some cases to the networks or circuits of articulation that broadcast the statements. Consider Glass and Nygreen's (2011) depiction of a discourse that is central to the CEC Report (though the phrase itself does not appear there) – "college for all":

> This discourse – articulating the world as it *is*; as it *has been*; and as it *might, could, or should become* (Fairclough, 2001) . . . has achieved near taken-for-granted status within education policy, practice, and research worlds. It reiterates familiar representations of schooling's role in economic progress and competitiveness but also incorporates two other powerful discursive strands: calls for greater equity and for opportunities for upward social mobility. The "college for all" discourse portrays a future in which equity, excellence, and international competitiveness are interwoven into a compelling narrative of progress – both individual and collective (p. 3).

Like Glass and Nygreen (2011), I see "college for all" as a dominant corporate and governmental discourse of the current era, but I view it as less stable and coherent than they seem to imply. Moreover, I take its dissemination throughout the country to be problematic and uncertain. As discourses move have to be recontextualized, augmented, edited, and transformed as they are transported, appropriated, and "embedded in specific places or territories" where they have effects (McCann, 2011, p. 144). In the end, at the local level, discourses become lumpy, contingent assemblages rather than neat packages.

"College for all" discourse, for example, does not spread across the US like an enveloping gas or fluid, but travels along narrow networks of policy animators operating at different spatial scales. Private foundations assert that all students must "graduate from high school college-ready" (Bill & Linda Gates Foundation, 2008, p. 4). Academic researchers broadcast the idea that the college degree is the "threshold requirement for access to middle-class status and earnings" – the "only pathway" to them (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010, p. 13). The President of the United States warns that "a post-secondary degree or credential" is "no longer just a pathway to opportunity for a talented few; rather, it is a prerequisite for the growing jobs of the new economy" (White House, nd). The Education Department translates this claim into an institutional mission: "the goal for America's educational system is clear: every student should graduate from high school ready for college or a career" (U.S. Department of Education, 2010; Education Week, 2014). All of this is shifted to the level of the city by actors such as the Columbus Mayor, who rearticulates the imaginary – while expanding it as well in ways examined later in this article – in a 2013 "State of the City" speech, which is subsequently used in the CEC Final Report to define the Commission'sview of school functions: "When our kids graduate from high school, they should be able to do one of four things: Get a good job. Go to college. Join the military. Or start a business" (CEC, 2013, p. 15).[5]

Such discourse chains "amplify" (Mirowski, 2013, p. 49) messages by repeating them across different spatial scales for different audiences. A narrative or image moving "along multiple channels using multiple voices. . . . is stronger and carries further" than one emanating from a single source

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[5] The Mayor's military and business futures did not figure in the Commission Report.

(Barley, 2010, p. 795), or as the founder of the neoliberal Atlas Foundation[6] puts it, "the echo is more important than the message" (quoted in Peck, 2010, p. 135). That echo also incorporates the various subtexts of the explicit message: the basic narrative of the education route to a future of good jobs and prosperity implies that it is not to be reached by investing in public services, raising wages, or providing health care and decent housing, but by creating human capital in the form of high-testing individuals. As President Obama explained in response to a question posed at a 2012 presidential debate, the way to "create new jobs" is to "improve our education system," through efforts like his administration's test-centered "Race to the Top" program.

To become grounded in a particular locale, as noted above, such discourses have to be hybridized with locally-specific narratives. The CEC Report does this in part by invoking impending risks for the city that can only be avoided by reimagining it as an aggregate of highly educated individuals. Careful not to undermine the city's current standing in inter-urban competition, it lauds the city's "strategic geographic location and strong private sector job growth," but positions Columbus in a narrative of future risk:

> The 11-county region boasts more than 50 college and university campuses and
> 145,000 students – a potential for development of human capital most communities
> would envy. Diving deeper, however, the picture is not as certain. A *Columbus 2020*
> analysis surfaced concerns about:
>> 1) An aging workforce that, as workers retire, will limit the availability of
>> people equipped with the skills needed for the workforce;
>> 2) Brain drain among young professionals who move away; and
>> 3) Lack of new workers to fill key manufacturing positions (CEC, 2013, p.
>> 15).

The city's access to the good future, the Report warns, is being undermined by an inability to "supply the long-term workforce needed to serve existing businesses, new companies and new high-growth enterprises . . . The stark reality is that the current state of education within our city puts Columbus at risk" (CEC, 2013, p. 14). What such passages do is transmute national narratives about the risks faced by individuals who fail to get college degrees, into a local narrative of the risks faced by the city if its schools do not satisfy the needs of both a professional class that demands college preparation for their children, and an existing local business community who demand schools that provide them with manufacturing and service workers. It is "college for all" discourse, but amended and reconfigured to fit a particular political context.

The next section lays out the framework I'll use to contextualize and interpret the temporal premises of the discourses examined. The remainder of the article tracks their uses in the CEC's Final Report. The conclusion examines the fate of the Commission's proposals – rejection by voters – and situates that rejection in tensions between the neoliberal imaginary and urban politics.

Analytic Approach: Studying the Discursive Construction of a Future

This is not a comprehensive examination of the CEC Report. Rather, my emphasis is on the Report's premises about temporality and its uses of the future, both of which are central themes

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[6] The Atlas Economic Research Foundation was created "to assist other [Mont Pèlerin Society]-related groups in establishing neoliberal think tanks in their own geographic regions" and "to launder contributions from such corporations as Philip Morris and Exxon and more specialized think tanks promoting their intellectual agenda" (Mirowski, 2013, p. 45).

running throughout its arguments. Of the "six key areas" around which the body of the Report is organized (CEC, 2013, pp. 39-92), for example, the first two – "recruit and retain high-performing teachers and principals" (p. 22), and "create more high-performing neighborhood schools and school choices" (p. 23) – define "performance" in terms of test scores. Although tests have many functions and uses, my emphasis is on their role as telemetry for tracking students' movement through school time and forecasting their scholastic futures. A third key area, "support state-of-the-art teaching tools and materials" (p. 22), refers in the Report to digital technologies that allow college-bound students to track their accomplishments and individuate the pace of their progression towards graduation. The fourth, "partner with the community to serve the whole child" (p. 23), is grounded in part in arguments that a child's early circumstances are predictors of their adult future. The fifth area of need, "making sure that every Columbus child is kindergarten ready" (p. 21), is linked to arguments that "economically disadvantaged" families fail to prepare their children to fit smoothly into school timetables (CEC, 2013, p. 40). Finally, the concept of "purpose" in the sixth area of need, "give students a clear purpose" (p. 23), refers to students' orientations to imagined futures.

The analytic framework used to explicate these kinds of temporal orientations and assumptions is derived from Wodak's five-part schema of discursive strategies used by political actors to construct groups as objects of political inclusion or exclusion (e.g., Titscher, Meyer, Wodak & Vetter, 2000; Wodak, 2002; 2011): 1) "nomination" or labeling strategies for framing and naming others; 2) "predicational" moves that attach attributes and values to the named groups; 3) "argumentation" strategies to support these attributions, or "justify and legitimize the exclusion, discrimination, suppression and exploitation of others" (Wodak, 2002, p. 41); 4) "perspectivization" strategies that attach the accounts to standpoints in wider debates; and 5) strategies for "intensifying" or "mitigating" the claims and force of the discourse (Wodak, 2002).

The focus of this article is less on discursive strategies for constructing groups than strategies for situating them (and places, like the city) in time. My provisional schema has four elements. The first, "horizon-setting," refers to the college-for-all discourse and neoliberal imaginary described in the previous above. The "horizon" is not the imaginary itself – the Manichean world of good jobs/bad jobs; prospering cities/failing cities – but the line of articulation at which current activity systems meet that future – in this case the juncture of schooling with jobs.

The second strategy is the 'nomination' or naming of the entity or entities imagined as moving in time – the temporal unit. In this case, nomination answers the questions of who or what has a future – individuals, families, organizations, cities, or nation states – and who or what doesn't? What kinds of entities are left out of the imaginary?

The third strategy, "temporal-reckoning" (cf. Munn, 1992), refers to the measurement and tracking of the temporal unit's changing relation to the horizon line. By providing quantitative measures of one's current distance from the future, reckoning reinforces the seeming reality of that future, and allows (perhaps encourages) people to calculate how their immediate actions and decisions move them closer to or farther from it.

The final temporal strategy used in the CEC report is "differentiation," or the division of populations into temporally-defined groups, that is, groups oriented to different futures, or moving towards the futures at different speeds.

The Individual as Temporal Object, and the Disappearing City

I'll begin with the definition of the temporal object. In neoliberal discourses, people are individuated, self-directed rational actors: this individual is the entity that moves in time and

progresses towards the future in education policy discourse. Which side of the Manichean future they end up in depends on how they individually "self-invest" in skills to strengthen their "competitive positioning" (Brown, 2015, p. 33; Urciuoli, 2008). The value of schooling, in this view, is temporally deferred and lies in its exchange value at some indefinite point in the future. To calculate what that value will be, families need some way linking present actions to outcomes a decade or more away. To provide this, the imaginary has to be "operationalized," a term used by Fairclough (2010), to refer to how imaginaries are "transformed into practice, made real" (p. 480).

In the case of 'college for all' discourse, operationalization is accomplished by coding the bifurcated future into the official categories and accounting practices of the school -- standardized curricula and tests. Together, these make it possible to compare students across a national territory and project the value of their work all the way to the horizon line separating secondary school from college. Why is this essential? "Human capital," in neoliberal logic, needs to move freely while holding its value, and the value of schooling becomes illegible if each education authority uses a different curriculum and test. As the Gates Foundation's website explained, without national standardization, the exchange value of a student's accumulated scholastic capital can dissipate as he or she moves:

> Imagine moving to a new state and finding out that your child—who was ahead of the class where you came from—is now behind it . . . Or, worse, what if the academic expectations in your new state are far lower? . . . Standards are too low, too diffuse, too confusing, and they vary from state to state (Phillips, 2010).

The proposed solution, reflected in the Foundation's now-nationally implemented "Common Core" of curriculum standards tied to standardized tests, is the creation of a national "education space," a term I borrow from European contexts, where it refers to a data space in which students' efforts are coded into "abstract and commensurable units, enabling exchange across borders and places" (Lawn, 2011, p. 259; Lefebvre, 1991; 49-51; 313). The US government is actively pursuing the creation of such a space by fostering "the creation of a common set of data elements that will enable information sharing across state lines," with the "potential to link current statewide information systems into an interstate information system" (Anagnostoupolus, Rutledge, & Jacobsen, 2013, p. 6). As state and national, private and public systems become interoperable, they cut across older state- and local-level differences and allow children to be characterized as bundles of test-defined human capital (Urciuoli, 2008) that can be compared and rated, regardless of where they children were schooled.

This not only means that households can move from one side of the country to the other while their children keep their in place in education space, but that families can stay in the same residence while their children schooling moves elsewhere. That is, school time can be individuated so that the child no longer progressives as part of a cohort or class, but instead can move towards the future horizon (the outer boundary of the education space) at his or her individual rate. Local secondary schools that enable students to gain university credits before high school graduation draw praise in the Report:

> Both eSTEM [in nearby Reynoldsburg, Ohio] and the Metro Early College High School [in Columbus] recently began a partnership with free, online content provider Udacity [a Silicon Valley venture capital-funded vendor of online courses] to give students access to college-level coursework (p. 55).

In this discourse, schools themselves become mobile, and no longer need be integrated into a given locale. The CEC report can thus speak repeatedly of "replicating" "high-performing" schools

developed elsewhere (CEC, 2013, pp. 23, 24), and argues that "innovations" found in a few of the district's schools, such as eSTEM and Metro High, should be "replicated in neighborhood schools. Young professionals mentioned this as a concern and a reason they would leave the city if they have children" (p. 30).[7]

The invocation of a smooth, nationally-scaled education spaces, across which both replicable schools and young professionals can move without friction, easily detaching themselves from particular contexts and plugging themselves in elsewhere, points to the ambiguous place of the city in the national imaginary. Whereas early sociologists portrayed schools as mechanisms for producing the urban realm -- territorial anchors around which "something like a new neighborhood and community spirit tends to get itself organized" (Park, 1915, p. 594) – neoliberal logics reimagine cities as something like simple containers of non-contiguous sites for work, leisure, consumption, schooling, and association. This is what Amin (2013b) calls a "telescopic urbanism" that fractures the city into "discrete territories . . . With no regard for the city as a social whole, it dismantles the politics of shared turf, common interests and mutual obligations" (p. 484). In such a city it becomes possible for children to "reside in one neighborhood, attend schools in another area, and play in parks distant from their homes" (Andre-Becheley, 2007; Montgomery, 2006, pp. 425-6). Schools with high test results thus remain important for real estate values (Chiodo, Hernández-Murillo, & Owyang, 2010; Ferrari & Green, 2013), but instead of community centers or neighborhood anchors, they function more as portals through which students move elsewhere -- either to the space of "competitive universities," or to the realm of less-than-desirable jobs. Good schools are *in* the city, but not *of* it.

Reckoning Moves: Tracking Movement in Time, Plotting Proximity to the Future

The idea that elementary and secondary schools are simply preparation for end-points "lying beyond" them – college or work – is not new (Dewey, 1922, p. 223; Flexner, 1908, p. 64). The current way of doing it, however, is distinctive. First, it pushes the logic far earlier in the system -- US states now track kindergarteners' "college and career readiness" with standardized tests (Strauss, 2014). Second, it narrows the scope of curriculum and marginalizes subjects lacking explicit economic relevance (e.g., the arts, physical education, history). Finally, it uses an unprecedented infrastructure of standards, tests, and databases (Anagnostoupolous, Rutledge, & Jacobsen, 2013) to enable adults to picture each child's current position in relation to college.

These transformations are consistent with the 'economization' of all activity (Brown, 2015) characteristic of neoliberal logics. Neoclassical economists are "obsessed by the future" (Pixley, 2014, p. 203). Instead of looking backwards to explain the causes of outcomes, they take outcomes as starting points and "look ahead to potential rewards . . . [using] discounting to pull uncertain future results back into the present, where decisions are made" (Abbott, 2006, pp. 405-6). Thus as the roles of economics in education policy and decision-making increases (e.g., Hirschman & Berman, 2014; Wolters, 2015), schooling is correspondingly reframed in a future tense. A key effect is to individuate one's relation to an inevitable future. Whereas for Keynes (1936), the uncertainty of the future meant people needed to engage in a social and collective struggle against "the dark forces of time and ignorance which envelop our future" (p. 155), neoclassical economics assumes a world composed of individuals able to calculate future outcomes in pursuit of their self-interest – a *homo*

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[7] The Report also suggests that replicated charter schools stabilize neighborhoods and provide alternatives to failed school districts. New Orleans is lauded in this regard, though the report notes that change there "was given force and momentum by the post-Katrina reality, and is therefore harder to replicate" (p. 67, n. 58).

economicus who "acts in full knowledge of the future and … knows the consequences of his actions" (Mini, 2002, p. 20). As Amin (2013a) points out, this rational-actor illusion is buttressed by forecasting technologies that promise control over the forces Keynes refers to – "new tools to see and act in the dark. . . . . risk forecasting methods based on probabilistic calculation, aided by sophisticated models offering close-to-real-life scenarios due to their parametric and temporal responsiveness" (Amin, 2013a, p. 141). In education, standardized tests provide the basis for one such forecasting system.

　　　Test scores are supposedly accounts of a child's past work, but one of their key uses is to track and predict the child's changing relations to the imagined future. As explained by the US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan (who visited Columbus during the Commission's term to support its efforts and criticize the current state of the city's schools), the federal government's goal was to develop temporal telemetry systems, that is:

>　　　comprehensive systems that track students from pre-K through college and then link
>　　　school data to workforce data. . . . Hopefully, one day we can look a child in the eye
>　　　at the age of eight or nine or 10 and say, "You are on track to be accepted and to
>　　　succeed in a competitive university and, if you keep working hard, you will absolutely
>　　　get there" (Duncan, 2009).[8]

Similarly, the Ohio government plans to give students, from 8 years-old onwards, annual "determination scores" that track:

>　　　[the child's] growth from year to year . . . and . . . if your child is on track for college
>　　　and career-readiness. . . . The way the assessment is being built, the promise is that if
>　　　you get a 4 (out of 5), we're saying to the colleges that you can go and take a college
>　　　class and earn a C. . . . That's why the determination score are so important (Official
>　　　speaking to Columbus Parent-Teacher Association Council meeting, 2013).

Such tracking systems shift the unit of scholastic time from the school term or school year, to the child's school career from kindergarten to high school graduation, understood as an integrated whole. That is, the child's position at age 9 becomes meaningful primarily as an indicator of his expected position at age 18. Primary school is framed as preparation for secondary, secondary for college. Parents and students can thus focus on "just those conditions that obstruct or advance" movement along the pathway to the higher level (Suchman, 1987, pp. 28-29). School-related decisions become something like *time transactions* in which expected future outcomes determine present decisions," and school activities become "forward projecting time envelopes" meaningful as links between the child's present and his or her educational future (Knorr-Cetina, 2010, p. 180).

Reckoning Moves: Individuating Space and Time through Digital Technologies

　　　The CEC Report also envisioned ways of expanding these "time envelopes" by combining test results with new forms of digital data. Referring again to Tom Vander Ark, the national expert mentioned earlier, the Report proposed creating a "digital layer" that would overlay physical and social space of the city to connect "all the learning environments in the community" (CEC, 2013, p.

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[8] Economic returns to high education have stagnated – college graduates "have not seen their real wage rise in 10 years" (Abel, Deitz, & Su, 2014; Baker, 2012; Mishel, 2011, 2; Shierholz, Davis, & Kimball, 2014), and formerly middle-class occupations have shrunken (National Education Law Project, 2014; Schmitt & Jones, 2012) and become vulnerable to "off-shoring" (Blinder, 2007; Hira, 2008). "College" alone is now framed as insufficient for good jobs, and "competitive" universities have become the imagined portals to them.

55). Blurring and extending the school's borders, the layer would link children to the school even when they were far from it by facilitating "one-to-one computing for every student and teacher" (CEC, 2013, p. 55).

More radically, the "calculative background" (Graham, 2011, p. 64) generated by the digital layer would allow the use of mobile recording devices – "data backpacks," a technology currently promoted by conservative organizations around the US (Raymond, 2008; Usifa, 2013; cf. Stokes, 2013; Hu, 2010) – to collect records of students' out-of-school activities and integrate these with school records. In materials submitted to the Commission, Vander Ark (2013) described how the backpacks would enable schools to collect 'keystroke data' that "makes it easier to get to know the needs and preferences of digital learners" and create "customized" and "unique learning pathways" for each student (Vander Ark, 2013; see also Hill, 2014). As explained in a *Digital Learning Now* report cited by the Commission, the data generated with the backpacks "would be populated by a set of common elements for all students." This would allow data-mining and the use of predictive algorithms that would supposedly enable officials to design individuated pathways taking each child towards the future he or she was best suited for (Bailey, Carter, Schneider, & Ark, 2012, p. 2). The figure of the student and the customer collapse into one another:

> Amazon, iTunes, and Netflix have demonstrated the potential of predictive algorithms. Adaptive software is powering high performance blended schools. Learner profiles—powered by achievement and keystroke data— will unlock secrets about the kinds of experiences that inspire persistence and performance for each student. . . . [and allow the creation of] a personally tailored experience . . . matched to student-level archives of information collected over years of building digital student profiles based on individual successes and failures of each student (Bailey, Carter, Schneider, & Ark, 2012, pp. 2, 10).

Although the CEC Report does not quote this passage, it uses similar language to describe a future in which educators will:

> immediately know a child's learning level, preferences, motivation and personal accomplishments. . . . The most fundamental – and promising – development in education in the last decade is the ability to mine the data gathered from actual student performance to help each student improve, by customizing curriculum, matching teachers and monitoring study habits.(CEC, 2013, p. 55).

The effect would be to "increase learning per hour," while "improved motivation and access should boost the number of learning hours per week and year" (Vander Ark, 2013).[9]

Rather than simply predicting the individual child's educational future, something the "determination scores" supposedly already do, backpack data and predictive algorithms promise officials the means to individuate and pre-structure that future through "personally tailored" experiences and "customized curriculum."

Temporal Differentiation: Purposes and Pathways to Work

This customization is only for part of the school population, however. The portions of the Report discussed above treat competitive universities as the normative destinations for students –

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[9] Concepts such as "learning per hour" are specific to discourses of online learning, an area in which a whole set of temporal transformations in school practice are introduced. What is interesting here is how this discourse is being insinuated into the CEC plan to characterize traditional schooling as well.

the route through which the proper neoliberal subject seeks to maximize his or her individual human capital. Failure to reach such universities is attributed to poor teachers, bad schools, the student's internal deficits, or his or her poor scholastic investment decisions. The role of social and economic inequalities in producing differential educational outcomes is simply ignored.

This neglect runs through the CEC Final Report, which is silent on the social structuring of inequality in Columbus's schools. In the discussion of digital backpacks, for example, there is no reference to class, racial, and gender-based inequalities of opportunities to learn that might differentially structure children's access to resources, or out-of-school activities (Chicago Teachers Union Research Department, 2015; Lupton, 2003; Neuman & Celano, 2001; Reese & Goldenberg, 2006). Rather, the Report and the experts it cites depict differences in these activities as manifestations of the child's individual 'preferences, motivations,' and effort levels.

Similarly, Columbus is the second or seventh most segregated city by class among the 30 largest metro areas in the US (Florida & Mellandar, 2015; Fry & Taylor, 2012). It is racially divided as well, with a poverty rate more than twice as high for Blacks and Hispanics than for whites (35% to 16%). Black children, who make up the 56% of the city's students (Blacks account for 28% of the total population), are "more than twice as likely to get an out-of-school suspension and three times as likely to be expelled compared with white students" (Bush, 2009).

Yet other than in references to the federal "Race to the Top" program, the term "race" is used only once in the Commission Report. "Racism" and "class" are never mentioned. The terms "Black" and "African American" are each used once. The term "minority" appears only in comments on the Report of a 1968 Columbus school commission, which had mentioned "unequal opportunities for success" (p. 84). "Diversity" is used in a generic sense to refer to "religion, language, ethnic background, sexual orientation and culture" (CEC, 2013, p. 79). One Commission meeting did focus on the city's growing Latino population, but there is no mention of Latinos in the final Report.

The social difference that *is* mentioned is "economic disadvantage." But this concept, used in the Federal Government's sense of students from families with incomes at 185% or less of the official poverty line (and thus eligible for reduced-price school lunches), actually deflects attention from the social forces that generate disadvantage. As used in the CEC Report, economic disadvantage is reduced to individual deficits. "Disadvantaged" families are portrayed as out of sync with school timelines – "eighty-two percent of children in district and public charter schools are economically disadvantaged, a fact that affects a child's chances of enrolling in preschool and being ready for kindergarten" (p. 15). Having made this observation, the Report moves immediately to link disadvantage to other conditions -- "homelessness, poor health and nutrition, addiction, mental health issues and other problems" – each of which is reduced to a constraint on the individual child's "ability to persevere through the existing education system" (CEC, 2013, p. 15). There is no discussion of how such disadvantaging conditions are created. Rather, the emphasis is on how they deprive the city of economic development:

> If even half of Ohio's 39,200 high school dropouts from the class of 2010 had earned their diplomas, the state's economy would have benefited from over $300 million in increased home sales, almost $20 million in increased car sales, 1,000 new jobs, and almost $15 million in additional state tax revenues (CEC, 2013, p. 16).

The solution, according to the Report, is to create mechanisms that orient such children towards a non-college work future. It explains, again in the context of 'economic disadvantage,' that "in the continuum of education from birth to work" – note how the school years are compressed into a

single unit – "communities that hope to prepare their young people for the workforce" – not college – "must find ways to address these challenges" (p. 15).

For the Commission, addressing the challenges means preparing disadvantaged children for a future in the local workforce. In contrast to its representation of university-bound students, the Report anchors non-university-bound students to the local region, where they are to be guided down "pathways" leading to locally-provided "community college and industry credentials" (p. 71) that will qualify them to "serve existing businesses" (p. 14).

Drawing heavily from a 2007 paper from the National Skills Coalition, the Report asserts that there is a future of "middle skills" jobs – occupations, in the Report's words, that "require more than high school, but less than a four-year degree." Casting education in terms of self-investment (Smith, 2010; Urciuoli, 2008), and implying that students taking this route do so of their own volition, without constraint, the Report proclaims this situation "good news for young people who are looking for well-paying jobs that don't require a four- to six-year investment at a university."[10] The emphasis of the Report shifts form helping individual students accelerate towards competitive universities, to training groups of workers to serve the city's businesses:

> Our economy requires not just degreed professionals, but those prepared for "middle skill" occupations, which comprise the largest portion of our future employment base. Indeed, meeting this demand is likely to be a determining factor in the continued growth of the Columbus and Central Ohio economies in the coming decade (CEC, 2013, p. 72).

The coordination of worker supply and business demand for middle skills would be accomplished by giving private sector representatives a major role in "guiding" curricular decisions:

> an advisory committee of employers – large and small, public and private – should be established to help guide the 9-14 career pathways [i.e., a curricular sequence beginning in 9th grade (students aged 13 or 14 years), and concluding in two-year vocational program (ages 19 or 20)] – to ensure that the emerging needs of employers are reflected so that graduates of these programs will be successful in the workplace (p. 74).

By combining its depiction of such programs with its descriptions of university preparation programs in other sections of the final report, the CEC is able create the image of a double-jointed school system. In one direction, the schools are represented as vehicles enabling students to accelerate individually towards competitive universities, a picture that may help the city keep its 'young professionals' and attract the kinds of businesses that hire them. The problem is that credentials from competitive universities hold their value over a wider geographical range than those of lesser-known or lower-rated colleges, and many of the students gaining them would be expected to move elsewhere rather than join Columbus's "workforce of tomorrow." Thus in the other direction, the public schools are represented as parts of locally-focused training systems – a picture that may help assuage the concerns of businessmen already based in Columbus concerned about the future supply of workers for manufacturing and service jobs.

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[10] The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the vast majority of new jobs in coming decades will be in low-paying jobs in low-skilled fields (Wicks-Lim, 2012). Scholars who speak of a looming "gap" in middle-skills workers (Kochan, Finegold & Osterman, 2012), define middle skills jobs to include occupations that require a 4-year bachelor's degree, and make no claim that most new jobs will be of this type, or invariably high-paying (see also Young, 2013).

Why should students prefer the latter to the former? While it could be viewed as a kind of fall back or consolation route for those with low test scores, the CEC report suggests that the real reason students from the 'economically disadvantaged' regions are not already committed to workplace pathways is that they lack the right "purposes" to guide their school and career decisions. *Giving students a purpose* was one of the "key areas of need" identified in the CEC Report, and the title of one of its main sections. The basic recommendation was that the schools should construct "pathways from school to work that provide young people with a sense of purpose in life and the ability to succeed in the workforce" (CEC, 2013, p. 72). As usual, a national expert, in this case the Chancellor of a multi-state, "online" university, was used to articulate and legitimize the point:

> Perhaps one of the most important challenges is what Mark David Milliron described to the commission as "helping a student get to the idea of purpose. Why are they on an education pathway, and what is the goal? If they understand the *why*, they can overcome almost any *how.*"
>
> Milliron, chancellor of Western Governors University in Texas, noted that the responsibility of students for their own success is sometimes overlooked. . . . "We need to help them understand this is not edutainment, this is education," he said. "An education is an engagement process that they're going to have to work at. And that's the notion of the growth mindset – you do not reward talent, you reward work." (CEC, 2013, p. 72; see also Milliron, 2012)

Instead of *homo economicus,* with full knowledge of options and futures, the non-university-bound student is epistemically limited. Such students do not know what to want, or how to proceed towards the waiting future.[11] They live in-the-moment, more interested in entertainment than education properly understood. The proper role of the schools is therefore to provide appropriate institutional motivations by helping students see that the future is not something to be imagined or created, but something to be found at the end of an existing pathway – in this case pathways through community college and industry training programs, or perhaps through low-status institutions like Western Governors University. The idea is still "college for all" perhaps, but not the sense of college that serves as reference point in other parts of the Report.

Conclusion: Failures and Alternatives

These dual horizons – college for all, but middle-skills jobs for some – reflect a response to one of two problems the neoliberal imaginary poses for cities: the tension between the need to construct a city-imaginary that appeals to families of children currently in the schools (a system "personalizing" education and pushing students into a national education space), and the need for an imaginary in which the schools meet the near-term labor needs of existing local businesses (a system producing skilled workers for the regional labor market).

The second problem, discussed below, arises from an incongruence between the neoliberal premise that education should be pursued as an individual (or familial) investment, and the neoliberal requirement of a strong central government to create and enforce "market" conditions (Brown, 2015; Peck, 2010). It is no coincidence that the school systems in which neoliberal reforms have been realized most completely (often against strong opposition) are those in which state-level

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[11] This seems to be a version of neoliberal (un)employment theory – a variant of the 'sticky wages' concept, in which unemployment is voluntary, a product of the worker's choices and inadequate information (Adler, 2010; Lucas & Rapping, 1969).

intervention has replaced local control with strong, centralized control structures (e.g., Chicago, New Orleans). "Neoliberalism, in its various guises, has always been about the capture and reuse of the state" (Peck, 2009, p. 7), or as Mirowski (2013) puts it, in "neoliberalism. . . . 'deregulation' always cashes out as 'reregulation'" (p. 57).

If, as I suggested at the outset, the Commission's basic objective was to create such an infrastructure for strong government at the local level -- the conditions of possibility for change -- the final report could not take the form of a detailed plan for specific projects to be approved or disapproved by voters within the terms of the existing governance structure. Instead, the "stimulating if often destructive maelstrom" of innovations (Harvey, 1989, p. 12) invoked in the CEC report omitted all specifics of which would be implemented, and how and when they might be introduced. Instead, the four practical proposals that emerged from the report focused on the construction of a new control regime. The most fundamental recommendation was to shift power from the elected school board to a "public/private partnership" that would:

> ensure the implementation of the Columbus Education Commission report . . . work
> to attract and support high-quality charter schools and replicate high-performing
> district schools . . . provide parents and families with clear information about
> educational options, and . . . encourage and train community members to be
> effective leaders in our educational system. (p. 24)

The second was to raise a tax levy (a 24% increase) to pay for changes this partnership might adopt. The third was to create a position of "Director of Educational Improvement" in the Mayor's cabinet (serving as liaison with the private-public partnership), and the last was to establish an independent auditor position to monitor the school system from outside its own bureaucracy. Such changes required voter approval, and a ballot was proposed for the coming fall.

The proposed centralization of control meshed with neoliberal logics. The proposed 24% tax increase did not. As noted earlier, in neoliberal logic, each family is to act as a self-interested, competitive unit, maximizing the development of its own capital. The money it spends on a child's education should be an investment in that individual child's future, with a schedule of returns defined by the child's age. The tax levy, by contrast, asked for familial investments in the future of a heterogeneous population, and promised uncertain individual returns that would be available, at best, at some indefinite future point, by which time one's own child may have left the schools.

This uncertainty over what the new taxes paid for undermined whatever appeal the centralized control structure might have had, and it alienated groups that were usually supporters of school levies. The regional Parent-Teacher Association announced a month before the election that it would not endorse the levy or other proposals, in large part because of uncertainty about what the public partnership would be implementing. For the Commission to have specified this beforehand, however, or included it in the ballot, would have turned reform into a plebiscite on those specific measures instead of a vote to shift authority to a new body.

The result was that the vote, in Autumn 2013 was a debacle for the Commission and the Mayor. Despite the backing of celebrity endorsers, and a $2.3 million campaign against an opposition spending $4,000, 69% of voters voted against the proposal, only 31% in favor. Opposition blogs and websites pointed to skepticism about charter schools, and to a general distrust of city officials stemming from the still-unfolding data-fixing scandal: "No cheaters, no charters" was a prominent anti-levy slogan. Perhaps more importantly, weak and uncertain economic conditions made efforts to increase taxes even more unpopular than usual: 64% of the levies in Ohio proposing new taxes failed in 2013 (Hansen, 2013). Finally, the affluent families that dominate

low voter turnouts in such local elections (Hajnal, 2010)[12] would have been the very families most likely to already have relatively good access to the kinds of schools they would need to propel their children into the imagined future, and thus had little incentive to support the proposals.

The "no" vote was not, however, a rejection of the future imaginary examined in the body of the article. When the Columbus School Board hired its own consulting firm to conduct focus group interviews on the future of the schools in the Fall of 2014, the results were different from those of CEC's – there was no advocacy for charter schools and digital fixes, for example – but they articulated essentially the same set of goals. Improved "student outcomes," for the 2014 groups, meant:

> - increased scores on all standardized metrics
> - improved academically
> - increased graduation rates
> - student readiness from Kindergarten to high school for next level, and college,
> work, military, business ready (Hicks, 2015).

The commonalities between the 2013 and 2014 statements -- both emphasizing "high performance," the use of test scores to track students' progress, and the function of schooling as preparation for the future – suggest that the imaginary has sunken into the institutional infrastructure schooling, and that it is being stabilized by the neoliberal project's blurring of 'educational,' 'urban,' and 'economic' policy. The current dense entanglements of the three mean that changes in one constrain the sense of possibility in the others. For many families, the experience of living close to the edge of financial ruin (Kirkham, 2015), seeing careers and "good" jobs become scarce (e.g., Kalleberg, 2011), and finding housing unaffordable (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2013; Right to the City Alliance, 2014), would make it difficult to conceptualize the future as other than the Manichean scenario described earlier, or to treat school as other than a struggle to avoid of the bad side of that future. The effect is to focus education politics on questions of *how* best to use the schools to prepare for the inevitable, while depoliticizing questions of how the future might be conceived otherwise, and how it might be shaped through schooling or other institutions. It locks us into the idea of the future as an already-known and unalterable set of options, instead of an open future that is "in no sense static . . . but entirely caught up in projects of action that aim to have real effects on the material world, and as such, always changing and adapting" (Graeber, 2007, p. 19).

What are the implications for activism and policy initiatives at national and local levels? Here there is space only to point in four general directions. First, the CEC report shows that economic, urban, and educational policy discourses are merging, but primarily in a neoliberal form that reduces schooling to a matter economic value-creation. Education activists and scholars need to paint a different picture of the relations among the three. Important work has already been done in this regard, with the most sophisticated versions emerging from city-based collectives focusing on particular urban complexes (see, in particular, Chicago Teachers Union Research Department, 2015). A critical question is how to formulate analogous challenges on a national scale, and to supercede them by integrating attention to impoverished 'rural' areas that increasingly function as the "operational landscapes" of cities (Brenner & Schmid, 2015). Second, as Harvey and Wachsmuth (2012) note, the question of "What is to be done?" is inseparable from questions "Who the hell is going to do it?" The elite standpoint of the CEC points to the need for people's commissions on

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[12] The turnout of eligible voters actually voting on the CEC proposals in 2013 was "18 percent, much smaller than the projected 30 percent turnout . . . based on past off-year elections" (Bush & Richards, 2013).

education reform that could facilitate learning and analysis grounded in local concerns. But this in itself would be inadequate. As Hess (2010) points out in a different context,

> The very "localness" of local knowledge is turned against it, because it can only manage to perceive short-term and localized dislocations instead of the potential for a beneficial long-term, globalized transition. . . . To counter the knowledge of mainstream economics and its justifications of corporate-led globalization, movement organizations need another type of knowledge, one that can serve as a countervailing expertise to the cosmopolitan science of mainstream economic arguments (p. 168)

As noted above, people's ideas about the schools and school functions are likely to be already saturated with neoliberal sensibilities. The need is not for one-off meetings, let alone more 'focus groups,' but for sustained engagement, with scholars and students from anchor institutions like the schools or local universities helping facilitate and sustain a larger and more inclusive knowledge-making community.

A third area of struggle concerns reimaging the uses of digital technologies. Internet-based concerns form some of the major tributaries of current education policy flows; the ideas that percolated to the top of the CEC report were full of computers and digital landscapes. Yet most of the corporate-generated discourse ignores social justice (or reduces it to "consumer choice") and much educational research and analysis remains, understandably, focused on bricks and mortar schooling. To successfully generate alternatives to the kind of planning described above – not just defeat it plebiscites, but offer different visions – requires the inclusive networks and collectives mentioned above to work out compelling ways of integrating a new vision of schools that would define them both as neighborhood anchors and community centers, and as situated in global circuits of knowledge production and transnational communication. Finally, the powerful emphases many educational researchers and activists currently give to race, class, gender, language, sexuality, and ability-articulated inequalities need also to systematically engage the question the CEC report took up but answered in such a limited way: How does what's happening in school relate to what happens 'beyond' it? This is not a matter of reducing school to mere preparation for something else, but of seeing the schooling as part of a unfolding movement – uncertain, contingent, creative, and by no means just a route through an already-laid out path – that begins and ends outside its putative temporal and spatial boundaries. All of which means crafting a politics that integrates education, urban reform, and work policy around a counter-imaginary of the future that portrays it as radically open rather than closed down and waiting for us, just beyond some ever-receding horizon.

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