The Gates' Foundation and the Future of U.S. Public Education: A Call for Scholars to Counter Misinformation Campaigns

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> America's high schools are obsolete . . . By obsolete, I don't just mean that our high schools are broken, flawed, and under-funded – though a case could be made for every one of those points. By obsolete, I mean that our high schools – even when they're working exactly as designed – cannot teach our kids what they need to know today . . . Training the workforce of tomorrow with the high schools of today is like trying to teach kids about today's computers on a 50-year-old mainframe. It's the wrong tool for the times. Our high schools were designed fifty years ago to meet the needs of another age. Until we design them to meet the needs of the 21st century, we will keep limiting – even ruining – the lives of millions of Americans every year.[1]

On February 26th, 2005 governors, policy makers, and business leaders from across the nation met to discuss ways of preventing American students from falling behind their international competitors. The "National Summit on High Schools," sponsored by Achieve Inc., marked the beginning of the conference, and Bill Gates was there to deliver the keynote address, where he made the above remarks. Since 1999 Achieve Inc. has received $10,921,771 from the Gates Foundation in order to "help states align secondary school math expectations with the demands of postsecondary education and work," as well as assistance for encouraging "specific states to adopt high school graduation requirements that align with college entry requirements."[2]

Indeed the Gates Foundation has spent over three billion dollars influencing American public schools, and while the donations seem laudable on some fronts, especially in an era of increased federal demands coupled with reduced federal spending, his philanthropy remains problematic. When corporate leaders shape government institutions according to their needs, countries move away from democracy and toward corporatism, a relative of, and arguably a precursor to, fascism. This paper is no place for a complete analysis of American democracy and fascism writ large, and we believe scholars have made a compelling case for keeping corporate leaders out of our classrooms as, despite their "best" intentions, their ideology ultimately undermines the democracy our schools purportedly serve.[3] Corporations are out for corporations, whereas democratic citizens, ideally, are out for each other.

John Dewey, American philosopher and vocal critic of traditional public schools, defined democracy as a system of associated living where individuals participate in the institutions governing them.[4] In a democratic school system, parents, students, teachers, academics and business leaders would participate in curricular decisions. Corporatism, on the other hand, requires citizen obedience to corporate demands; individual needs are ignored. In the case of U.S. public schools, CEOs have great influence on the curriculum whereas parents have little to none. Individual students become products whose manufacture is subject to the whims of the market. As our society becomes more market based, we have seen stricter coordination between government and industry. This coordination often comes in the form of government-business partnerships, where elites from both groups decide how public institutions should be shaped and run. Ultimately, corporatism undermines the legitimacy of

individual citizens and any possibility of democracy, as these elites, often unelected, make decisions for the people. This paper problematizes the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's involvement with the reformation of U.S. public schools. Focusing on four organizations funded in-part by the foundation, we use Chris Mooney's work on "political science abuse" to illuminate how corporate-funded think tanks and advocacy groups generate "spontaneous consent" for pro-corporate educational reform.[5] We then raise questions about the legitimacy of what these organizations say and do, with the hope that scholars will work to counter misinformation campaigns made possible by corporate philanthropists such as Bill Gates.

Neoliberalism and Public Education

"Neoliberalism and public education" warrants a book of its own, and indeed there is no shortage of literature on the subject. We include a brief treatment here to help situate the activities of these four think tanks as part of an ongoing, national movement to regulate and/or privatize public education. Neoliberals seek to create educational systems suited to increasing economic productivity.[6] Measuring productivity requires controlled conditions and repeated assessments, which exist today in the form of schools operating under a testing regime. Neoliberals use these tests as "objective" proof that U.S. public schools are failing in a variety of ways. School failure, according to neoliberal logic, will result in America's loss of dominance in the global market place, a refrain started in the early 1980s when the neoliberal Reagan administration used *A Nation at Risk* to scare Americans into educational restructuring.[7] Indeed as we show later in this paper, neoliberal educational reformers continue to employ fear as a tactic to drive educational change.[8]

Neoliberals believe that embracing free-market reforms will save America's schools.[9] Embarking on multiple media and political campaigns to color all schools failures (facilitated by a federal program which recently branded 1 out of 3 American schools as failing[10]), neoliberal educational reformers argue that parental choice will result in the best schools succeeding. Parents, informed through objective test scores (now available everywhere due to federal requirements), can select which schools they wish to support, thus determining which schools survive in the market. "Public schools," explains the neoliberal Milton & Rose D. Friedman Foundation, "respond positively to competition."[11] There is not a single shred of scientific evidence to support the Friedman Foundation's claim.

Despite their use of the word "free," neoliberals need a strong state to create and regulate markets,[12] and neoliberal reformers have been successful at using the state to meet their demands, working with local, state, and federal judicial and legislative bodies to force regulation and privatization on citizens who are, by most accounts, happy with their schools.[13] Once the market replaces the public, according to neoliberal reformers, the best schools, those with the highest test scores, will force the worst schools to shut down, and every American child will get a "high quality" education, ensuring that America retains its status as a global economic superpower. We now turn to four organizations working to regulate public education according to neoliberal ends.

Overview of the Four Organizations

Examining each organization on the receiving end of Gates Foundation money is a project more suitable for a book than a paper. Upon analyzing Gates Foundation records we found 441 organizations received $3,369,942,557 for educational projects between 1999 and June 2007.[14] These organizations range from neoconservative think tanks such as the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the Manhattan Institute[15] to neoliberal think tanks such as the

Education Trust and Education Sector. Gates money also went to various State Departments[16], public school districts[17], and charter school organizations.[18] For this analysis, we chose four think tanks that appear to be the most politically active over the past two years. These organizations produce research and analysis, engage in state and national policy debate, and use the public sphere to promote neoliberal educational reconstruction. A brief examination of the individuals driving these organizations—and the language these individuals and organizations employ—will help clarify their means and ends. Towards that end, we use their words as frequently as possible in order to avoid misrepresentation.

The Education Trust: $5,076,846[19]
"Established in 1990 by the American Association for Higher Education as a special project to encourage colleges and universities to support K-12 reform efforts," the Education Trust has matured into "the #1 education advocacy organization of the decade, according to the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center. The Ed Trust was also ranked as a top influential information source in education policy, and [their] president, Kati Haycock, was ranked as one of the most influential people in education."[20] The two most influential people in education above Mrs. Haycock were Bill Gates and George W. Bush, respectively.[21] From The Education Trust's website:

- The Education Trust works for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, pre-kindergarten through college, and forever closing the achievement gaps that separate low-income students and students of color from other youth. Our basic tenet is this — All children will learn at high levels when they are taught to high levels.

- The Education Trust provides: advocacy that encourages schools, colleges, and whole communities to mount effective campaigns so that all their students will reach high levels of academic achievement; analysis and expert testimony on policies intended to improve education; and writing and speaking for professional and general audiences about educational patterns and practices — both those that cause and those that close achievement gaps between groups of students; research and wide public dissemination of data identifying achievement patterns among different groups of students; assistance to school districts, colleges, and community-based organizations to help their efforts at raising student achievement, especially among minority and poor students.

Specifically, The Gates Foundation granted the Education Trust money to support various activities.[22] In addition to the 2.3 million "general operation" funds given to the organization between the years of 2002-2006, monies have been specifically allocated to the American Diploma Project and the California High School Status Report. Technical assistance support was given for the Los Angeles Unified School District to develop their high school progress report as well. Additionally, The Trust was awarded 2 million dollars in 2003 for research and dissemination of "effective" practices.

Education Sector: $600,000[23]
Founded in 2005 by Andrew J. Rotherham and Thomas Toch, "Education Sector is an independent education think tank."[24] Claiming to be "nonpartisan" and "both a dependable source of sound thinking on policy and an honest broker of evidence in key education debates," Education Sector produces both research and policy analysis and markets "outstanding work by the nation's most respected education analysts."[25] The "nonpartisan"

and "independent" Education Sector's Board of Directors, Research Advisory Board, and Non-Resident Fellows include individuals such as:

- Bruno V. Mano, a trustee of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and longtime advocate for charter schools;
- Ira A. Fishman, who "served as the first Chief Executive Officer of the Schools and Libraries Corporation, the non-profit organization created to administer the E-Rate program."[26] We remind the reader that the E-Rate program was riddled with fraud and millions of tax dollars were wasted and stolen;[27]
- Eric Hanushek and Paul T. Hill, both members of the neoconservative Hoover Institute's Koret Task Force;
- Frederick M. Hess, Director of Education Policy Studies at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute; and
- Various members of the Center for Reinventing Public Education, which "engages in research and analysis aimed at developing focused, effective, and accountable schools and the systems that support them."[28]

This list of individuals makes the following, taken from Education Sector's homepage, problematic at best and a flat-out lie at worst. We include this lengthy citation as it exemplifies "doublespeak," and we will turn to propaganda later in this paper.

> Education policymaking in the United States suffers from a dearth of high-quality, independent analysis. Far too often, the quality of deliberation and decision- making on critical education issues is compromised by ideologically driven research and commentary. Important debates are dominated by the distorted claims and counterclaims of individuals and institutions with ideological or political agendas. Many policymakers and the public, as a result, simply don't trust much of the evidence put before them on key education questions. In a 2003 survey by the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media, a large majority of journalists covering education dismissed most education research as "ideologically motivated." The journalists told surveyors that they "hunger for assistance from an objective, neutral source" in education debates. There is thus a tremendous need for a new, rigorously independent voice in education policymaking. Education Sector will be such a voice, an organization devoted to innovative solutions to the nation's most pressing educational problems, a source of sound thinking on education policy and an honest broker of evidence in key education debates in Washington and nationally. Education Sector will produce rigorous, independent research and analysis on a wide range of elementary-, secondary-, and higher-education topics. We will eschew the ideological orthodoxies that have polarized the national debate on so many education issues. We believe that public officials, journalists, business leaders, and the public at large will embrace education reform if they believe such reform is justified by solid, independent evidence. Education Sector will play a key role in producing such evidence and making it readily understandable to a broad audience of policymakers, the media, and other opinion-makers with the power to leverage meaningful change in American education.[29]

One must wonder how Education Sector can be "neutral," "rigorously independent," and "an honest broker of evidence" when its board of directors, advisory board, and fellows vocally embrace privatization and standardization. When Frederick Hess, for example, takes time off from the American Enterprise Institute to work with Education Sector, does/can he take

off his neoconservative hat to become "an honest broker of evidence" in order to "eschew the ideological orthodoxies that have polarized the national debate on so many education issues"?

The Aspen Institute's Commission on NCLB: $3,263,965[30]
The Aspen Institute is one of the most recognized names in the world. It began in 1950 as a place for "CEOs, Supreme Court justices, high-tech pioneers, policymakers, and Nobel laureates to deepen their knowledge and engage in informed dialogue."[31] "Together," continues the website, "they exchange views, broaden their perspectives, and explore innovative solutions to the foremost challenges of our time."[32] While the Gates Foundation does not fund the Aspen Institute directly, the foundation provided support for Aspen's "Commission on No Child Left Behind." Co-chaired by former governors Tommy G. Thompson and Roy E. Barnes, the commission formed in order to:

analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and [to] make bipartisan recommendations to Congress, Administration, State and local stakeholders, parents and the general public to ensure that the law is an effective tool in spurring academic achievement and closing the achievement gap. As part of this effort, the Commission [examined] the impact of NCLB on Federal, State, and local efforts toward improving academic achievement for all students, reducing the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their non-disadvantaged peers, improving instruction in core academic subjects, and recruiting and retaining a highly qualified teaching force.[33]

The Commission operates under six guiding principles:

1. All children can learn and should be expected to reach high standards.
2. Accountability for public education systems in the United States must improve to enable students to excel.
3. The achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their non disadvantaged peers must be eliminated to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed.
4. Education results for all students must improve in order for the United States to remain competitive in the global marketplace.
5. Parents have a right to expect their children to be taught by a highly qualified teacher. Teachers have the right to be treated like professionals, including access to sound working conditions and high quality preparation and ongoing professional development opportunities.
6. Education reform must be coupled with additional resources, but Federal, State, and local resources must be used more efficiently and effectively to ensure results in return for the increased investment.

The Gates Foundation helps the Institute achieve each of these in various ways.[34] For example, Gates awarded the Institute over a million dollars in 2005 to fund a commission of "bi-partisan" members to evaluate the effectiveness of NCLB as a gap closing tool. The Gates Foundation also supports teacher education initiatives such as the Aspen Urban Superintendents Network, which is a series of forums for leaders in the public school system. An additional half-million dollars was used to support professional development seminars and peer-learning forums for superintendents of large, complex urban school districts. Another million dollars was awarded between 2003-2004 for seminars on education issues and to support the conference "From High School to College, Work and Citizenship: Learning Pathways for Youth."

ED in 08 / Strong American Schools
The youngest of the four organizations covered in our analysis, ED in 08 / Strong American Schools:

> is a nonpartisan public awareness and action campaign offering a voice to every American who supports 'ED in 08.' [Their] goal is to ensure that the nation engages in a rigorous debate and to make education a top priority in the 2008 presidential election. [They] hope that candidates will offer genuine leadership rather than empty rhetoric and tell voters how they intend to strengthen America's schools so all students receive the education they deserve.[35]

While the organization claims to do nothing more than use its 60 million dollar budget to start a "serious nationwide debate on education reform" amongst 2008 presidential contenders, ED in 08 does in fact have an agenda and believes the candidates should focus on "three priorities that hold great promise for improving education":

- Agreeing on American education standards
- Providing effective teachers in every classroom
- Giving students more time and support for learning.[36]

As with the other organizations covered in this study, ED in 08 offers a number of "fact sheets" for individuals and organizations interested in educational reform.[37] Importantly, ED in 08 has been very active in the public sphere disseminating those "facts," employing celebrities to carry their messages, publishing op/eds in papers across the country, and purchasing advertisements in print, online, and on television.[38] As with the other three organizations receiving Gates funding, the "facts" ED in 08 forwards are misleading at best and flat out lies at worst. We turn now to justifying this claim.

Propaganda and Political Science Abuse

While not without its problems, the democratically constructed and maintained Wikipedia offers a robust and appropriate definition of the term propaganda:

> Propaganda is a type of message aimed at influencing the opinions or behavior of people. Often, instead of impartially providing information, propaganda can be deliberately misleading, or using fallacies, which, while sometimes convincing, are not necessarily valid. Propaganda techniques include: patriotic flag-waving, glittering generalities, intentional vagueness, oversimplification of complex issues, rationalization, introducing unrelated red herring issues, using appealing, simple slogans, stereotyping, testimonials from authority figures or celebrities, unstated assumptions, and encouraging readers or viewers to "jump on the bandwagon" of a particular point of view.[39]

To varying degrees, each of the organizations examined in our study engages in one or more of the above activities in their efforts to influence "the opinions or behavior of people." For example, "leave no child behind" and "closing the achievement gap" are "appealing, simple slogans" that few people can disagree with. At the same time the "achievement gap," as we will show below, is an "oversimplification of a complex issue." Bill Gates is obviously a celebrity, traveling the country encouraging people to "jump on the bandwagon" that America's public schools are failing and must be saved via a number of market based reforms—either outsourcing education to supplemental educational service providers or closing public schools and restructuring them as private, for profit, or charter schools.

What earns these organizations the label propaganda however, is that while they claim to be "impartially providing information" with words such as "non-partisan," "independent," and "not for profit," they deliberately mislead voters and their representatives with narratives that are "sometimes convincing," but "not necessarily valid." This process of

convincing takes place through a process that Chris Mooney calls "political science abuse." As explained by Mooney, political science abuse is "any attempt to inappropriately undermine, alter, or otherwise interfere with the scientific process, or scientific conclusions, for political or ideological reasons."[40] While Mooney does not extend his analysis of political science abuse to education specifically, his framework extends to the field. We employ Mooney's terminology in an effort to detail how these organizations generate support for neoconservative and neoliberal educational reform efforts.[41]

According to Mooney, individuals and organizations engage in political science abuse in a number of ways. They might, for example "*undermine science itself*" by dismissing research as irrelevant or flat out false. Frederick Hess provides an example of this with his recent smear of the American Educational Research Association's 2007 annual meeting, a place where scholars go to "celebrate their own awesomeness" rather than engage in substantive work.[42] Recall that Hess works for both Education Sector and the American Enterprise Institute. Educational reconstructionists may also "*suppress*" information while attempting to make a convincing argument for their side. Such suppression occurred when the Department of Education attempted to hide one of its own studies critical of charter schools.[43] Similar suppression occurred when members of the Commission on NCLB traveled the country saying things such as "There is broad agreement that testing plays a critical role in education,"[44] while failing to mention that hundreds of the country's most esteemed psychologists, psychometricians, and educators offer convincing evidence to the contrary. Most recently and poignantly, Sharon L. Nichols and David C. Berliner show that high-stakes testing obfuscates what actually goes on in classrooms and has in fact resulted in the mis-education of hundreds of thousands of children.[45]

One significant way these four organizations engage in political science abuse is by "*rigging the process*," controlling the input of data in a policy debate by either packing a panel with scientists who are like-minded or by airing one side of the story. Nationally, the most visible example of this is the scandal-ridden, federally-funded Reading First program.[46] The Aspen Institute's Commission on NCLB is also guilty of this abuse. Traveling the country setting up "hearings" where witnesses discussed NCLB, The Commission packed panels with neoliberal and neoconservative reformers. While a handful of active school administrators participated, the Commission did not call on a single classroom teacher to "testify." Instead, the Commission heard testimony from individuals such as:

- Kati Haycock, the Director of the Education Trust
- Chris Whittle, CEO and Founder of Edison Schools[47]
- Andrew Rotheram, Co-Founder and Co-Director, Education Sector
- John E. Chubb, Koret Task Force, Hoover Institution
- Michael Petrilli, Vice President for National Programs and Policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation
- Chester Finn, President of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation[48]
- Michael Cohen, President of Achieve (a for profit educational organization)
- Neal McCluskey, Education Policy Analyst of the Cato Institute
- Susan Traiman, Director, Education and Workforce Policy, Business Roundtable[49]
- Brian Gong, Executive Director of the National Center for the Improvement of Assessment
- Eugene Hickok, Former Bradley Fellow at the Heritage Foundation and Senior Policy Director of Dutko Worldwide
- Aimee Guidera, Director of the Data Quality Campaign
- Stuart Kahl, President and CEO of Measured Progress

It should be no surprise to readers familiar with these individuals that they called for policy changes that directly benefit corporate America. For example, at a hearing in Hartford Connecticut, "Aimee Guidera, Director of the Data Quality Campaign, emphasized the importance of supporting state efforts to develop longitudinal data systems that track individual student performance from pre-K through 12th grade, even into postsecondary education."[50] The Data Quality Campaign, created in 2005 with a grant from the Gates Foundation, works "to provide support for and advocacy on behalf of organizations that create, collect, and use education data in an effort to improve student achievement."[51] Guidera "urged the federal government to build the capacity of all education stakeholders to use data," explaining, "educators are scared of data; data has been seen as a hammer. We want them to see it as a flashlight, as the most important tool in their arsenal."[52] Stuart Kahl, President and CEO of the for-profit Measured Progress, assured the Commission that testing companies had the "capacity to handle the increased data assessment demands of NCLB" but asked that companies be given more time "to verify that each school had results for all its students…."[53] Read differently: every child in every school must be tested.

During a Commission hearing in Wisconsin, Eugene Hickock—formerly a Bradly Fellow at the Heritage Foundation and now the Senior Policy Director at a multi-million dollar lobbying firm—spoke on behalf of supplemental educational services. "SES [supplemental educational services] represents a potentially valuable educational opportunity not fully realized under No Child Left Behind."[54] He blamed the failure to fully implement SES reforms on people "who feel the money would be spent better under their direction," and he stressed that the tutoring provision "must be measured and extended over time." In Washington Chris Whittle, Founder and CEO of the for-profit Edison Schools, a company that benefits directly from NCLB's sanctions, "recommended reevaluating the law's provisions that deal with corrective action and restructuring."[55] At that same meeting, long time charter school advocate John E. Chubb suggested that responsibility for enforcing choice provisions should be "taken away from districts and put in the hands of a state education agency."[56] Chubb also argued that "eligible parents and students [should] be able to choose any regular or charter public school in any school district—provided the family handles transportation out of the district." None of the speakers at any of these hearings offered empirical evidence that any of their reforms would lead to better schools for America's children, a type of political science abuse Mooney refers to as "*dressing up values in scientific clothing."*

Perhaps the most egregious way these organizations abuse science is by "*hiding errors and misrepresentations*." While Mooney defines this as making false claims or distorting data, it also involves deliberately misleading individuals, using fallacies, and the oversimplification of complex issues—three hallmarks of propaganda as defined in this paper. After analyzing the four Gates-funded think tanks, we identified three shared claims that are misleading, contradictory, oversimplifications, or flat out lies:

- Other countries are out performing America, endangering it's place in the global economy
- The jobs of the future require a highly skilled workforce
- NCLB is working

"International comparisons show…"
The argument that America's students are felling behind their international peers has been forwarded since at least 1957, when conservative educational reformers blamed poor schooling for Sputnik. In 1984 *A Nation at Risk* revived the meme, and today members of both political parties return to this fallacy when discussing educational reform. One of the most common refrains forwarded by the four organizations we surveyed is that foreign students are outperforming American students, threatening America's dominance of the

global economy. "International comparisons show," argues the ASPEN Commission on NCLB, "that the level of performance of American students is consistently surpassed by that of students in other countries."[57] From Ed in 08 we learn that "By the time they've graduated from high school, students in other countries have obtained the equivalent of one more year of education than their American counterparts."[58] More specifically the Education Sector notes that when comparing mathematics exams, "Students in Chinese Taipei, Japan, and Singapore far outperformed U.S. students on every test."[59] Most recently, Amy Wilkins of the Education Trust told the host of NPR's "On Point," that America's "most affluent kids are getting their lunches eaten by kids in other countries."[60] This country needs more rigorous testing requirements argue the men and women running Ed in 08 because "Left unchecked, a 'race to the bottom' among states would imperil efforts to raise student achievement and put America at even greater disadvantage internationally."[61]

Each of these claims is a misrepresentation, an oversimplification, or a fallacy, and researcher Gerald Bracey spends significant amounts of time debunking all of them.[62] For example, when The Commission claims students in other countries outperform American students, Bracey reminds listeners to ask "which students?" If we compare the top students from Singapore to students relocated to Houston after Hurricane Katrina, then obviously one group will outperform the other. Though that is not what Amy Wilkins of the Education Trust would have people believe. Recall her claim that America's "most affluent kids are getting their lunches eaten by kids in other countries."[63] This is simply not true. When Bracey disaggregated international testing data by poverty rate he found:

> for reading and science, the two categories of US schools with the smallest percentages of students living in poverty score higher than even the highest nation, Sweden in reading, [and] Singapore in science. In math, the top US category would be 3rd in the world. It is only in American schools with 75% or more of their students living in poverty where scores fall below the international average.[64]

Bracey also reminds us that there is no correlation between performance on tests and economic productivity, as each of these think tanks would have us believe. For the better part of five years the United States has ranked first or second on the World Economic Forum's "Global Competitiveness Report." This year the U.S. ranked sixth but not because of schools. Bracey shows that corruption, failing infrastructure and macroeconomic stability (national debt, trade deficits, a war, and tax cuts) caused the U.S. to lose its top ranking.[65] Bracey concludes:

> American economic competitiveness with Japan and other nations is to a considerable degree a function of monetary, trade, and industrial policy, and of decisions made by the President and Congress, the Federal Reserve Board, and the federal departments of Treasury, Commerce and Labor. Therefore, to conclude that problems in international competitiveness can be solved by educational reform, especially educational reform defined solely as school reform, is not merely utopian and millenialist, it is at best a foolish and at worse a crass effort to direct attention away from those truly responsible for doing something about competitiveness and to lay the burden instead on the schools.[66]

"The jobs of today and tomorrow require a highly skilled workforce…"

Each of these four organizations argues that students must receive specific training in order to prepare them for highly skilled jobs. Writing in *Thinking K-16*, a journal published by the Education Trust, Patte Barth, argues that "The Information Age set off a rush to find skilled workers in many occupations and simultaneously reduced the proportion of unskilled

jobs."[67] She warns ominously, "The future holds grim prospects for young people who lack sufficient skills, for they are increasingly shut out of good, middle-income jobs. The occupations experiencing the largest growth are those that demand well-developed cognitive skills and postsecondary credentials."[68] That growth, reports Ed in 08 on a "fact sheet" entitled *American Education Standards*, means that "Two-thirds of new jobs being created in today's economy require higher education or advanced training."[69] Those students not entering "high skill" jobs must receive a rigorous education heavily dosed with math and science, urges Education Sector, because "Today even blue collar jobs call for more than basic computational skills."[70] Indeed, according to ED in 08, "Occupations that pay enough to raise a family—jobs like electrical work, construction, upholstering, and plumbing—now demand the same math and reading skills it takes to be successful in college."[71] The ASPEN Commission paints an even bleaker picture for America's workforce, arguing that students are not prepared for either high skilled jobs or blue-collar work. They report that "large numbers of employers and college professors say that expectations for students do not match what they need to succeed after high school."[72]

These statements are misleading at best. Recent research from the Urban Institute shows that U.S. public schools are producing more scientists and engineers than the market demands.[73] According to our own research, out of seven million new jobs projected from 2004 to 2014, only 28.5% require a high school or college degree.[74] A mere 7.1% require graduate level schooling (See Figure 1).

We are not arguing that students should not stay in high school, and we deny no one the right to a college education. We simply question the motives of individuals who claim that rigorous training in math, science, and reading will prepare students for a workforce that purportedly requires high levels of all three when job forecasts indicate the vast majority of jobs require rudimentary skills at most. Who benefits when there are more workers than the market requires? Who loses when children focus on one skill set, math and science for example, at the expense of others, say critical media literacy or civics?

"*NCLB is working."*

In a recent online debate with Deborah Meiers, Diane Ravitch argued that "The Center on Education [CEP] Policy [which also receives Gates support[75]] released a report on NCLB, concluding that it was overall having a positive effect on achievement."[76] Ravitch, while not a member of any of the organizations critiqued in our analysis, works closely with individuals such as Chester Finn, and she fiercely advocates for rigorous national standards.[77] After reading the report ourselves, we had difficulty understanding how Ravtich could make the claim, and we contacted Jack Jennings, President of the CEP for clarification. He told us Ravitch was misusing the data. "In fact," he told us, "one of our five main conclusions is that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to prove causality between state test score trends and NCLB."[78] Ravitch is not alone in doing so.

At the ASPEN Commission hearing in D.C., Deputy Secretary of Education Raymond Simon began his testimony with the claim that NCLB "has had a truly extraordinary and positive impact on our schools over the past five years…."[79] When Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust, addressed the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, she told them that "despite the shortfalls in funding and the anxiety about AYP, [NCLB] is having a dramatically positive impact on American education."[80] And while Haycock noted that "nobody thinks the law is perfect," she informed the committee that "educators in every part of this country have told [her] that this law strengthens the hands of those who are working to improve overall achievement and close the achievement gaps…."[81] Haycock's conclusion: "Because of NCLB, achievement gaps are no longer simply tolerated; a culture of achievement is taking hold in our schools, and we are better poised to confront the new challenges."[82] Andrew Rotherham, Co-Director of Education Sector, was more reserved in

his praise for NCLB, but he urged the ASPEN Commission to work to make the law stronger, arguing that "the framework it offers, tying federal resources clearly to reform and results, is the most promising avenue for education policy making today and one we should improve and refine rather than jettison."[83] Ed in 08 has no formal position on NCLB, but they do support "rigorous American education standards," with some sort of (undefined) national enforcement in order to prevent a "race to the bottom" from states lowering their testing requirements.[84]

Is the "achievement gap" closing? According to many researchers the answer is a resounding "NO." Gary Orfield, writing for the Harvard Civil Rights Project (yet another recipient of Gates funding[85]) argues "that neither a significant rise in achievement, nor closure of the racial achievement gaps is being achieved."[86] Other individuals showing that high-stakes testing has or will ultimately increase the "achievement gap" by reducing opportunities for genuine student development and growth include esteemed researchers and scholars such as David Berliner, Sharon Nichols, Deborah Meier, Bruce Fuller, Monty Neill, Lisa Gusibond, Bob Schaeffer, Derek Neal, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, Linda McNeil, and Linda Perlstein, to name a few.[87] The ASPEN Commission itself acknowledges that achievement gaps remain widespread, with achievement decreasing as students move beyond middle school.[88]

Retired principal and current teacher Steve Davidson asks an interesting question. Is closing the achievement gap a worthy goal?[89] He argues that a shrinking achievement gap could indicate a decrease in student performance. This would occur if:

- Scores for black students improve while white students make no improvement
- Scores for black students improve while white students score lower
- Scores for black students make no change while white students score lower
- Scores for both sets of students decrease with white students decreasing at a faster rate[90]

In fact, as Davidson shows, the only way the "achievement gap" can close with benefits to both groups is for the test scores of black students to increase at a faster rate than those of white students. Given the world we live in, this will hardly happen anytime soon.

Recall that propaganda requires the "oversimplification of complex issues" and the use of "appealing, simple slogans." Reducing the "achievement gap" to what goes on inside of schools has proven to be an effective way for policy makers to ignore all of the other "gaps" outside of America's classrooms. While researcher after researcher has shown that outside influences contribute to student performance and achievement, proponents of high-stakes, standardized reforms continue to press for more "rigor," as if harder work alone will mitigate every outside factor influencing children's lives.[91] Rather than focusing exclusively on the "achievement gap," policy makers and educational reformers might consider policies that help reduce other "gaps" that exist within our country. Gaps that could be narrowed in order to improve the lives and schooling of all students include but are not limited to:

- The incarceration gap, where six times as many African Americans are behind bars compared to their white counterparts[92]
- The homeowner gap, where 72.7% of white Americans own their homes compared to 48.2% of African Americans[93]
- The healthcare gap, where 71.4% of white Americans are insured compared to 53.9% of African Americans[94]
- The earnings gap, where white Americans average over $20,000 more a year than African Americans[95]

- The poverty rate gap, where 8.7% of white Americans live at or below the poverty line while 24.7% of African Americans do so[96]
- The unemployment gap, where 5.7% of white Americans are unemployed while 13.2% of African Americans are without work[97]
- The happiness gap, where 72% of white youths say they are happy with life in general compared to 56% of their African American counterparts[98]
- The murder gap, where 49% of murder victims in the United States are African Americans, who make up 13% of the population.[99]

Schooling does not exist in a vacuum, and it should come as no surprise to the reader that failing schools are most often found in "failing" communities, the majority of which are non-white. Jean Anyon (predating Gerald Bracey) argues that failing schools are "a logical consequence of the U.S. macroeconomy—and the federal [neoliberal] and regional policies and practices that support it."[100] Anyon correctly rejects neoliberal reformers who blame teachers, principals, students, and schools for the "achievement gap." As she explains, "an unjust economy and the policies through which it is maintained create barriers to educational success that no teacher or principal practice, no standardized test, and no 'zero tolerance' policy can surmount."[101] We agree with Anyon and Bracey: policy makers serious about narrowing the "achievement gap" must look beyond schools and begin addressing the very real gaps that are the arguable result of replacing social responsibility and democracy with market fundamentalism.

Conclusion

In this paper we have identified and problematized the claims and activities of four think tanks supported by contributions from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. We have attempted to show that these contributions support scholars and research of dubious quality at best. Engaging in political science abuse, these organizations perpetuate discourses and narratives that stand in opposition to democratic school alternatives, ultimately reducing the likelihood that democratic school reform will ever take place.

Scholars who support democratic school reform must engage publicly and politically to counter the political science abuse taking place in public and political spheres. Importantly, we must do so in language that is accessible to multiple publics, lest our arguments, eloquent as they may be, remain secreted away in journals. Gramsci clarifies what we call for here. "The mode of being of the new intellectual," he writes, "can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader,' and not just a simple orator."[102] The growing numbers of academics blogging and reaching out to mainstream media outlets is a positive step, but we have yet to become "permanent persuaders" who have the access or amplification of our counterparts housed in Gates' funded think tanks. However, such access and amplification is not beyond the reach of scholars who envision more democratic schooling, as I (Philip Kovacs) have argued in this journal.[103] Part of the problem is academic insularity, engaging with one another while change takes place in the world housing us. Scholars are left reflecting while others act.

While critiquing neoliberal policy is necessary for moving beyond it, we cannot limit our activities to analysis and critique alone, especially when that analysis and critique only reaches the eyes and ears of like-minded scholars. Therefore, in addition to intelligent critique, we call on the academic left, if there is such a body, to become publicly and politically active, challenging the half-truths, misrepresentations, and flat out lies being disseminated by organizations such as those covered in this study. This requires building

relationships with reporters, bloggers, policy analysts, and members of political parties from both sides of the aisle.[104] Importantly, as Gerald Bracy and Jean Anyone argue, education does not exist in a vacuum, and schools are subject to outside influences such as macroeconomic policy decisions. Therefore relationships must be cultivated with pro-democracy reformers in areas such as economics and urban planning, as these individuals can help us reach wider and larger audiences using language that may be unfamiliar to scholars who spend most of their time in the world of educational policy. We understand that scholars may be uncomfortable acting as constructors, organizers, and permanent persuaders, but we also recognize an evolving landscape, one dominated at present by neoliberal reformers who are not at all shy about what they are doing or how they are doing it. Letting them go unchecked all but guarantees a system of education that continues to put the needs of corporations before the needs of democracy.

Figure 1

Occupation	**Job Projection**	**High School**	**College**	**Graduate**
Retail Salespersons	800,000	**No**	No	No
Registered Nurses	700,000	Yes	Yes	No
Postsecondary Teachers	500,000	Yes	Yes	Yes
Customer Service Representatives	475,000	**No**	No	No
Janitors and Cleaners, except maids & housekeeping cleaners	450,000	**No**	No	No
Waiters and Waitresses	425,000	**No**	No	No
Food Preparation & Service Workers, including fast food	425,000	**No**	No	No
Home Health Aides	400,000	**No**	No	No
Nursing Aides, Orderlies, & Attendants	300,000	**No**	No	No
General Operations Managers	300,000	Yes	Yes	No
Personal and Home Care Aides	300,000	**No**	No	No
Elementary Schools Teachers, except special education	275,000	Yes	Yes	No
Office Clerks, general	275,000	**No**	No	No
Laborer and Freight, Stock, & Material Movers, hand	250,000	**No**	No	No

Receptionists & Information Clerks	250,000	**No**	No	No
Landscaping & Goundskeeping Workers	225,000	**No**	No	No
Truck Drivers, heavy & tractor-trailer	225,000	**No**	No	No
Computer Software Engineers, applications	225,000	Yes	Yes	No
Maintenance & Repair Workers, general	200,000	**No**	No	No

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