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Teacher Dissent in Neoliberal Times: Counter-Publics and Alternative-Publics in Teacher Activism

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ABSTRACT. In this essay, Terrenda White examines distinct forms of activism by two influential organizations: the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Teach for America (TFA). Despite differences between these groups, both have created new discourses and alliances among teachers in the public sphere — what White calls “teacher publics.” These new alliances, White argues, can be conceptualized as *counter-publics* and *alternative-publics*. CTU is a counter-public because its activities counter the tradition of top-down insular unionism and embrace “social movement unionism” where teachers are part of an expansive coalition for social transformation, including contesting city and state bureaucracies for adequate resources and equitable practices on behalf of minoritized communities. TFA has also created expansive coalitions for change, embracing a “new professionalism” that rejects public contestations with state leaders for resources. As an alternative-public, TFA engages a network of private philanthropists and business leaders to generate change in public education through market-based initiatives that challenge bureaucratic control of teachers and schools and that incentivize competition, audit culture, and data-driven decision-making. These two cases, because their approaches to educational change are so different, provide fertile ground for White’s evaluation of what new forms of activism mean for the democratic goals of public schools.

KEY WORDS. teacher activism; teacher unions; Chicago Teachers Union; Teach for America; new professionalism; democratic education

<1>Introduction</1>

In the spring of 2018, massive teacher protests (including teacher walkouts, rallies, and social media campaigns) unfolded across the country and prompted a record number of teachers across thirty-two states to run for public office by the end of the year.¹ Statewide walkouts, unprecedented in scope, received the most attention and resulted in significant increases in resources for teachers and students, including substantial pay raises and supports for supplemental services.² The timing and location of the earliest walkouts, in politically conservative states such as West Virginia and Oklahoma, were particularly noteworthy. While unions and collective bargaining are legal in these states, it is illegal for teachers to go on strike in them. Hence walkouts, and later “sick-out” campaigns, flouted traditional notions of activism and seemed impervious to the Supreme Court’s 2018 decision in *Janus v. AFSCME*,³ which weakened the levying powers of public sector unions across the country. Despite this political and economic blow to unions,⁴ however, teacher activism has demonstrated its enduring and innovative potential with a combination of traditional and novel work stoppages erupting in scores of cities across the country. This activism is occurring both in “blue” states with relatively strong union support and in “red” states that have traditionally been most hostile to unions and had the weakest legal structures for protecting labor militancy.

But while visible forms of teacher activism have captured the public’s attention, it is unclear what is at stake for public schools when teacher activism is less visible, private, or muted. What does teacher activism *do* for public schools, particularly when teachers engage in public and private forms of advocacy for educational change? Recent examples of activism include teachers contesting state bureaucracies in creative ways to secure resources and better conditions in their schools. These efforts have garnered much attention and praise, but what should we make of teacher groups, similarly energized to foment educational change, but less inclined to do so via public forms of contestation?

I argue that new teacher groups, such as Teach for America (TFA), are well organized for change, but they favor engaging with private actors beyond the state in order to secure sponsorship for desired education models and to produce the schooling conditions necessary to enable those models to flourish. By creating new discourses about teaching, recruiting a new cadre of teachers, and mobilizing private actors (philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and business elites) to support these new school models — where the new recruits, in turn, teach — multiple generations of TFA teachers (and leaders) have now worked free from the constraints imposed by traditional district oversight, and largely disconnected from traditional teachers and teacher associations. In this sense, the reorganization of public schools — a product of new governance systems and alternative labor markets — has fomented new professional identities, groups, and affiliations among teachers. How, then, should teachers' engagement with public education be understood when the organization of public schools is highly differentiated and teachers' experiences have increasingly diverged? In short, what counts as teacher activism in public education when the boundaries of public schools and the identities of public school teachers are in flux? Should teachers who opt out of traditional public schools be understood as participating in new forms of activism, particularly as an increasing number of the new schools established represent overt efforts to refuse and transform the sector of public education as we know it? And, importantly, what is gained or lost when strategies for change in the public sphere reject public forms of confrontation and dissent, such as organized *withdrawal* from traditional public schools managed by districts and elected school boards?⁵

This essay builds on research on new labor in market-oriented times and considers what current trends mean for teacher activism and the democratic purposes of public education. As it stands, teacher activism is rarely explored as a nuanced and varied phenomenon with multiple meanings, actors, and aims. Recent jurisprudence, however, has shifted our ideas about what counts as “political activity” by teachers. In light of *Janus*, the definition of political activity on the part of teacher unions has changed: conventional ideas of political activity as involving, for example, endorsements of politicians or political parties have expanded to encompass routine bargaining activities with government entities. Still, while collective bargaining is categorized as political

activity, the choice *not* to bargain with government employers is less scrutinized — yet certainly noteworthy — as a potential political act.⁶ These choices may reflect forms of withdrawal — refusals, in a sense — that convey strong ideas about government, including the belief that government should play a limited role in the management of public schools. Relatedly, teachers' decisions to work in public schools managed by private groups, such as charter schools, could be more than circumstantial and may appear increasingly likely to be informed by new discourses and ideologies about the role of the state (and markets) in public education. Hence, as the definition of political activity by teachers has been modified by the courts, and as teachers' professional affiliations and workplaces have gone through a restructuring process, I argue that our common understandings about teacher activism must shift accordingly. In this vein, teachers should be recognized as political actors whose actions take complex and divergent forms. Some activism may indeed operate within the existing public school system and within unions, yet other activism may exist outside — and even in opposition to — these recognized public institutions.

In this essay, I explore divergent forms of activism in two teacher groups: the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Teach for America (TFA). Both groups have emerged in recent decades as influential actors in the production of discourses about teaching and educational policy in the United State, with each pursuing different strategies to effect social and institutional change. CTU, for example, marshals broad coalitions of support to tackle wide-ranging issues that affect students and their families, and it often fuses civil rights and labor rights in order to carry out new forms of unionism known as social movement unionism or community-based unionism.⁷ These efforts depart from traditional forms of unionism that have generally focused on insular issues of salary, working conditions, and benefits. TFA, on the other hand, while less commonly regarded as an “activist” group, leverages extensive networks to mobilize support for particular educational policies, largely by courting new actors in education from the private sector, including philanthropists and business elites.⁸

Despite their differences, both groups have greatly influenced the public sphere, in particular, the “theater of debate” about public schools. As such, I call them “teacher publics.” Further, I argue

that these new alliances can be conceptualized in two ways: as *counter-publics* and as *alternative-publics*. The former reflects CTU's position in the public sphere, organizing critical interrogations of city and state leaders as it works with rank-and-file union members and historically marginalized students and families. The latter reflects TFA's position in the public sphere, also working on behalf of excluded and marginalized groups, but aligning with alternatives to state power via devolution and market approaches to public schooling. Each group serves as an analytic case to examine new, yet divergent forms of teacher engagement in the public sphere, offering insight about the shifting nature, meaning, and consequence of teacher activism in public education. While both the approaches taken by both groups are novel and effective, I consider here what each group's approach means for the democratic purposes of education.

<1>Politics and Public Education</1>

U.S. political history is rife with populist movements led by ordinary people dissatisfied with the inertia of institutions and organizations ostensibly designed to serve them. In many ways, teacher activism is an example of such movements, an expression of widespread disaffection with elite state actors⁹ and the conditions of state services and public institutions. But while interpretations of populist movements have been nuanced, including cognizance of the divergent groups that make up "right" and "left" orientations to populism, teacher activism has received less scrutiny, perhaps in part due to the perception of teachers as an undifferentiated interest group, a view informed by the function of teachers *as* state actors who implement government policy and practices. Given the range of political ideologies and strategies for influencing the public sphere, however, no political party or entity has a monopoly on populism, and teachers are deeply embedded as participants in the broad and complex public sphere.

In education, as Michael Apple notes, modern conservative movements encompass tenuous coalitions of groups with conservative ideologies aimed at reforming public schools.¹⁰ Apple identifies four groups: (1) those who make appeals to freedom from state bureaucracies in order to gratify market desires via choice and competition (neoliberals); (2) those who make appeals to standardization and "back-to-basics" curricula (neoconservatives); (3) those who make appeals to

morality and a return to traditional values (religious conservatives); and (4) those who make appeals to technocratic forms of management via data-driven decision-making on the part of teachers (new professional middle class).¹¹ Apple's framework, particularly its description of new middle-class professionals, is closely tied to what Julia Evetts calls "new professionalism," where new forms of management integrate private-sector logics into public institutions, reorienting the work cultures and the professional identities of public workers such as teachers and administrators.¹² New professionalism is part and parcel of what many call New Public Management¹³ or new managerialism.¹⁴ Professionals in these systems must adapt to significant changes as they transition from "a rule-governed, administrative, bureaucratic management model" to "an outcomes-based, entrepreneurial, corporate model of management."¹⁵ Teachers who work effectively in schools under new managerialism operate with an ethos aligned with market competition, including performance cultures based on high-stakes testing, data-driven decision-making and evaluation, prescribed curriculum, and professional cultures that place less emphasis on teachers' conceptual knowledge and instead laud and reward their efficient execution and implementation of best practices.¹⁶

Yet progressive organizations in education are also made up of a patchwork of tenuously connected groups with noteworthy differences, including among teacher unions. In many unions, for example, labor scholars have noted important schisms between leadership and rank-and-file members due to hierarchical and antidemocratic decision-making.¹⁷ Tensions have also emerged in the goals set by unions, as scores of social justice caucuses have emerged and have challenged leaders to expand beyond traditional bread-and-butter issues of wages, pensions, and working conditions to include organizing for broader social, political, and economic change as well as challenging privatization and racial discrimination in educational practices.¹⁸ Divisions along lines of race and class are also evident, particularly in education where teachers are largely white and middle class and the students they serve are increasingly racially diverse, particularly students in large urban districts with histories of educational marginalization and disenfranchisement.¹⁹ These tensions have been heightened by previous struggles — quite explosive, in some cases — of communities of color to gain influence over how the public schools in their neighborhoods are organized.²⁰

While the tensions internal and external to unions are important for its members and the parents and families they serve, they are also important for understanding the democratic functions unions serve in society writ large. Indeed, teachers work in a specific context — the public school — that theorists have argued is central to developing the deliberative practices necessary for participation in a democracy.²¹ Sarah Stitzlein notes that public schools should “encompass the act of creating common worlds through solving problems together for mutual benefit” and “bringing together different viewpoints around shared concerns.”²² Consequently, public schools should aim to foster dispositions that aid participatory democracy, wherein citizens actively work together to shape public institutions and policies, rather than merely serving as a society’s voting members who remain otherwise passive.²³ Unfortunately, many ascendant models of governance in education (for example, state takeover, mayoral control, and private management of schools) have prioritized its human capital functions, such as preparation for workforce participation, often via measurement of student learning and academic growth. As such, the political powers of elected school boards and the deliberative functions they once served for parents and residents have weakened.²⁴

These shifts in governance have also led to divergent forms of political engagement. Stitzlein has found, for example, that among parents who voiced strong objections to public school practices — opting their children out of standardized tests, demanding alternative curricula in schools, or invoking parent “trigger laws” — many exhibited different *modes* of contestation, particularly in terms of their engagement and disengagement with public institutions and the public sphere.²⁵ Some parents, for instance, opted out of practices in schools as a form of “dissent” intended to bring attention (and scrutiny) to questionable practices and to urge collective and public processes of deliberation for the purposes of remedying grievances and (ultimately) improving public schools for all students. She identifies acts of this sort as “good dissent.” On the other hand, some parents withdrew from public schools altogether, using vouchers to send their children to private schools or home schooling their children. Stitzlein conceptualizes these withdrawals as “bad dissent” because they fail to facilitate public deliberation about how to remedy or improve public schools. According to her, good dissenters view themselves as citizens connected to a broader collective body, while bad

dissenters view themselves as individual economic consumers and thus independent from larger social relations of power that shape school district resources and opportunities for students.²⁶

Like parents, teachers also engage with their public institutions and can also exhibit forms of dissent in response to various practices. Teachers' engagement with schools, however, is intertwined with their professional identities and role expectations, which are complicated due to shifts in the management of schools and the waves of policy mandates at local, state, federal levels. These conditions can result in quite varied and often contradictory expectations. In some contexts, teachers are positioned as professionals who should make informed decisions about student learning; at other times, as low-level bureaucrats who should focus on compliance and implementation of externally derived practices and policies; and at other times still, as partners and facilitators in civic learning for democratic participation and citizenship. Such contradictions are not only unwieldy and exhausting, but they often create deep moral conflicts for teachers. Doris Santoro has documented the "intensification" of teachers' work, which she argues contributes to a sense of "demoralization."²⁷ Demoralization, she contends, is "far more than a state of being dispirited or even very depressed. It signals a state in which individuals can no longer access the sources of satisfaction that made their work worthwhile."²⁸ Demoralization also increases when teachers act in isolation; here, collective action, professional communities, and political engagement may serve as powerful venues teachers can use to shape their own circumstances and contexts. Yet, what does it mean for teachers to act? How might we name and understand teacher activism, particularly in cases where such activism takes shape outside public institutions or even in opposition to them?

<1>Teachers in the Public Sphere</1>

Democratic theory defines the public sphere as spaces that encourage deliberation about the common affairs of citizens.²⁹ In her essay "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," Nancy Fraser notes important distinctions between the public sphere and state apparatuses and economic markets. She defines the public sphere both as a site for "the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state," and also as a "theater for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling."³⁰ However, while

the public sphere is distinct from market relations and state apparatuses, hierarchical power relations in a stratified society impose limits on the quality of access to and participation in public spheres, thus rendering what Jürgen Habermas calls the “liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere.”³¹ As such, public spheres are necessarily varied and multitudinous, including bourgeois publics comprising those with high social status and “counter-publics” comprising those with lower social status who are typically excluded from established forms of public participation.³² Counter-publics foster robust deliberations and full democratic participation within the public sphere and between the public sphere, the state, and the market economy.

The extent to which members of CTU and TFA are active in “theaters of debate and deliberation” about education, contributing rich discourses about education policy and the quality of public schools, and leading to networks of actors who mobilize for change accordingly, they can be reasonably thought of as publics — what I term “teacher publics.” It is difficult, perhaps, to think of teachers as constituting a *counter*-public, since these publics typically encompass the voices of those excluded from or marginalized in the public sphere; in fact, these publics counter the voice of the bourgeoisie in particular. Yet, both CTU and TFA appeal to the needs and rights of historically marginalized students, framing their advocacy on behalf of students and communities underserved by an unequal public school system. In this vein, participation in the public sphere by teachers in CTU and TFA is *intended*, regardless of its impact, to serve subaltern groups in education. Importantly, however, as Fraser notes, not all “subaltern counterpublics are necessarily virtuous; some of them, alas, are explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian; and even those with democratic and egalitarian intentions are not always above practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization.”³³

Drawing on Fraser’s analysis, I argue that close examination reveals important distinctions between CTU and TFA. The history of teachers unions, for example, indicates that many of them have engaged in practices that were considered anti-egalitarian with respect to race, even while they have served as a subaltern public for a disenfranchised group, largely white women teachers. Consider, however, the function and popularity of Black teacher associations throughout the early

twentieth century until the 1970s. With an extensive array of strategies to organize for resources, as well as specialized journals, conventions, meeting places, and shared pedagogic practices oriented to the particular education needs of Black children, these associations represented a subaltern public.³⁴ Their formation is also indicative of the exclusionary practices of traditional, largely white teacher unions and associations. CTU, beginning in the 1960s and developing more strongly in recent decades, has changed as a result of “intra-public relations”³⁵ and caucuses within unions committed to racial inclusivity and to explicit antiracism projects, including restorative justice practices and an end to “zero tolerance” policies, support for sanctuary schools that protect undocumented students, advocacy for adoption of Ethnic Studies classes and training in culturally relevant pedagogy, and the hiring of more Black teachers in the city’s schools.

TFA, on the other hand, has faced criticism on multiple fronts, including concerns about the lack of diversity among corps members, the adverse impact high turnover of corps members has on school communities, and the inequity TFA fosters by placing inexperienced teachers in underserved communities.³⁶ Like teacher unions, however, TFA has worked over time to improve racial diversity among corps members, taking ambitious steps in recent years to, for example, intensify their recruitment efforts at historically Black colleges and universities.³⁷ A number of researchers and former TFA members have nonetheless become vocal critics of the organization’s practices, including its racial diversity initiatives.³⁸ They have also challenged other normative practices in the organization, such as the branding of corps members as the “best and brightest” and capable of “saving” failing schools despite little training;³⁹ its approaches to instruction that implicitly convey deficit views of the cultures of minoritized students;⁴⁰ and its extensive network of sponsors and funders in the business sector who champion market-based rather than collective systemic forms of improvement in public schools.⁴¹ In some ways, like caucuses within unions, these groups reflect “intra-public relations” and tensions within the organization. However, the critical views of TFA alum have found less traction and influence in the organization. Hence, despite potential as a counter-public that channels voices typically excluded in the public sphere, or expansive ideas of

equity and inclusion for historically marginalized groups, TFA reflects more closely Fraser's cautionary note about the antidemocratic and anti-egalitarian norms of liberal bourgeois publics.

Chris Higgins and Kathleen Knight Abowitz note that publics do not emerge "fully formed on the political scene," but are shaped through "a wide arc of activities and growth over time."⁴² Indeed, they argue that publics are verbs in the sense that they are achieved through public work, including the everyday problem-solving efforts of citizens (elected officials and nonelected citizens alike) engaged in deliberative and participatory institutions.⁴³ According to this view, both CTU and TFA have "achieved" new publics by organizing social and political actors, advancing a new grammar of public education, and a new sense of "we" in their broad campaigns to remake public schools.

Amid the shifting boundaries of what "public" means in the context of education, however, it is worth analyzing each group's orientation to and impact on public schools and the public writ large. To do so, I extend Fraser's work to the cases of TFA and CTU in order to undertake comparative analysis of each group's functions and deliberative practices. As each group has constructed robust theaters of deliberation about public schools, and both are semi-autonomous from state entities, I argue that CTU and TFA have formed distinct and divergent teacher publics. By divergent, I mean the core differences that define these two teacher publics, including the visions of reform they have articulated, the composition of their political actions, and the modes of accessibility to and participation in the publics they have organized. In addition, I will demonstrate that their critical orientations to the state, in terms of how they engage and confront state actors as well as nonstate actors, vary considerably.

<1>Chicago Teachers Union: A Counter-Public</1>

An early leader in teacher unionism, CTU played an influential role in national politics and union policy from the 1930s until the 1960s, when its influence was eclipsed by New York's teacher unions.⁴⁴ It rebounded in the 2000s with its famous and successful nine-day strike in 2012, which received overwhelming support from students and parents in Chicago's public schools. CTU was also an early example of progressive interracial coalitions for change, beginning with its United Progressive Caucus in 1968, which included African American substitutes and Irish-American staff

teachers.⁴⁵ Indeed, the politics of race in the 1960s, in Chicago and nationwide, shaped CTU's evolution and approach to city politics and educational policy. Historian Elizabeth Todd-Breland notes that by the late 1970s, the majority of CTU members were Black, and the union responded to multiple and complex strategies on the part of Black and Latinx communities who sought to increase educational opportunity and democratic control of public schools.⁴⁶ The strategies of these communities ranged from desegregation to self-determinism, including movements for community control and independent Black institutions.⁴⁷ In each of these struggles, Black teachers in particular played pivotal roles, organizing for the expansion of educational opportunity, both within the CTU and outside of it.⁴⁸ Importantly, the politics of schooling in Chicago, as depicted by Todd-Breland, is a complex narrative in which "public schools are neither solely authoritarian state-controlled bureaucratic political spaces nor solely community spaces."⁴⁹ These dynamics are compounded by the duality of teachers, particularly Black teachers, as public workers (employees of the state) and as civic actors in their communities. Although these tensions endure, they have shaped an orientation to unionism that embraces grassroots organizing with communities, as well as with rank-and-file members, in order to build sufficient power to challenge city and state leaders and to strengthen democratic participation in public education.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, CTU had embraced social movement unionism, which marries issues of labor with social justice and civil rights. Such an approach produces a unique and robust framework for organizing to challenge local, district, and state policies and practices in schools. In this way, CTU represents what Fraser describes as a "post-bourgeois public,"⁵⁰ not only because of its critical orientation to state power, but also because of its mobilization of a broad and inclusive coalition of historically marginalized groups, including youth, parents, community-based organizations, and public sector workers and organizers in other public institutions (for example, health and housing).

CTU, however, is not representative of most teacher unions in the country. Indeed, for a long period, teacher unions operated more in line with Fraser's description of "bourgeois publics" due to their insular and exclusionary operations, including on the basis of race. According to Brian Jones,

organizer and critical scholar of race and education policy, “The ideology of white supremacy has always been an Achilles’ heel of the union movement.... At their worst, unions have been outright racist and many explicitly excluded African Americans for a long time.”⁵¹ Mistreatment, racial discrimination, and exclusion of Black students and teachers from public schools have created deep divisions in several cities between the mostly white teacher workforces in large urban districts and the mostly Black and Latinx children and families they serve. Over time, however, unions evolved to become not only racially inclusive,⁵² but also one of the most powerful mechanisms for the political and economic advancement for people of color, including Black workers — especially Black women workers.⁵³ This evolution has been a long process, dating back to the work of the civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. Toward the end of his career, King focused intently on unions as an essential vehicle for social advancement in Black communities, commenting in a speech he delivered in 1957 that “The forces that are anti-Negro are by are large anti-labor, and with the coming together of the powerful influence of labor and all people of good will in the struggle for freedom and human dignity, I can assure you that we have a powerful instrument.”⁵⁴

Indeed, dramatic expansion of the public sector during the twentieth century, combined with the growing influence of African Americans in city, state, and national politics, opened up opportunities for Black workers in the public sector far earlier than similar opportunities became available in the private sector. Public sector employment, therefore, became *the* economic niche for African Americans, especially after World War II, and has continued to be central to wealth accumulation and social mobility for African Americans.⁵⁵ Between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s, public sector union membership of African Americans more than quadrupled. In 1970 alone, nearly half of all Black male professionals and two-thirds of all Black female professionals worked in the public sector. As such, it is estimated that Black people working in the public sector earn more money than those working in the private sector do; this is especially true for Black women compared to Black men.⁵⁶ In 2000, for example, almost half all Black women (43 percent) worked in state or state-related industries.⁵⁷ As the most unionized occupation in the country, K–12 teaching was an important occupation for Black teachers and for the expansion of the Black middle class and its

political influence. By 2013, there were nearly three-and-a-half million K–12 teachers in the United States, 40 percent of whom belonged to one of two teacher associations: the National Education Association (NEA) or the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

The strong representation of Black teachers in CTU has been significant for the union’s development as a counter-public, as Black teachers have long connected education to political projects for freedom and liberation on behalf of excluded groups, enacting a sociopolitical consciousness wherein schools are part and parcel of social transformation and racial uplift.⁵⁸ The fact that this counterhegemonic orientation is not evident in teacher unions in other regions of the country may be due in part to less inclusive racial representation in the membership and (specifically in the South) to displacement and enduring barriers to teaching in public schools.⁵⁹

The onset of market-based reforms in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (including austerity policies that reduce funding for public services and social welfare) coupled with devolution and deregulation of public institutions (such as schools) have created challenges for — raised hostilities toward — public sector unions. Moreover, these challenges have fallen disproportionately on teachers of color, especially Black educators in large urban districts like Chicago.⁶⁰ In particular, and in light the significant decline of Black teachers in cities such as Chicago,⁶¹ policy researchers have begun to explore the relationship between the declining number of Black teachers and the marketization of public schools, including the expansion of charter schools and the cadres of teachers employed in these new school contexts who are often from alternative teacher education programs.⁶²

<1>Teach For America: An Alternative-Public</T>

Twenty-five years ago, Wendy Kopp founded Teach For America, describing it as a two-pronged mission to improve educational opportunities for low-income children. The first prong of TFA’s mission includes the recruitment of college graduates who commit for two years of teaching in high-poverty schools; the second prong is to promote change beyond the classroom through leadership and policy. These missions are intertwined in the sense that TFA leverages its more than 42,000 alumni and corps members to pursue leadership roles and to advance policies designed to

remake public education. Indeed, while TFA is often regarded as an alternative teacher preparation and placement program, policy researchers Janelle Scott, Tina Trujillo and Marialena Rivera, all alums of the program, note that TFA's "greatest point of influence in public education is not in classrooms, but in its facilitation of entry into leadership positions aimed at reshaping public schooling."⁶³ Specifically, in 2007, TFA launched Leadership for Educational Equity, a 501(c)4 and a spin-off of TFA created to provide resources, training, and networking for alumni interested in elected office and other leadership positions.⁶⁴ In 2014, TFA listed an expanded network of leaders, legislators, reformers, and advocates, including 670 principals, 150 system leaders, 70 elected officials, and 170 policy / advocacy leaders.⁶⁵ Researchers Kerri Kretchmar, Beth Sondel, and Joseph Ferrare used network analysis methodologies to sketch a wider map of the intricate and rather dense relationships between TFA and its partners, which they describe as an "education entrepreneur network."⁶⁶ The network includes partnerships with a significant number of business executives, investment bankers, corporate foundation leaders, venture philanthropists, government officials, and national and regional charter management organizations.⁶⁷ The network's advocacy campaigns for public schools, in which TFA is described as a "central node," endorses a slate of reforms, most strongly the expansion of charter schools and other market-based initiatives tied to choice and competition, as well as merit-based pay structures and teacher evaluation systems.⁶⁸ Hence, while beginning as an alternative teacher preparation program meant to help meet crisis-level teacher shortages in hard-to-staff schools in underserved communities, TFA has evolved into an influential player in the realm of policy and advocacy, often tightly aligned with school-choice and market reforms that it believes will create equitable schools and school outcomes.

Teach for America is one of many alternative teacher education programs in the country that have grown steadily since 1990s.⁶⁹ However, while most alternative education programs are not university-based — and are commonly referred to as "Teacher Prep 2.0"⁷⁰ — TFA partners with schools of education for licensure and course content while focusing its efforts primarily on recruitment, placement, and delivery of numerous specialized professional development sessions, all led by TFA staff, throughout corps members' tenure. Nonetheless, like most alternative education

programs, TFA's model appeals to, and is often influenced by, social entrepreneurs seeking to innovate teacher education by applying business approaches tied to choice and competition.⁷¹ In this way, TFA incorporates the ideals of "new professionalism," which comprise business principles related to managerialism and entrepreneurialism.⁷² Bolstered by such principles, TFA positions its alternative-route teachers in distinct ways, as new professionals motivated to "get results" and to transform schools by means of strong instruction, regardless of social inequities and inadequate resources.⁷³ Importantly, amid pro-market fundamentalism and the rise of antigovernment sentiment over the past thirty years, alternative teacher education programs that have aligned with business elites and philanthropists, and that have lauded the principles of management in the private sector, have shown themselves to be better able to "legitimate" claims of professional authority and expertise.⁷⁴ New networks and coalitions between teachers and private sector actors have thus emerged in this form of teacher public. The networks themselves, however, are largely constituted by elites and do not include historically marginalized groups, despite their ostensible aims to serve disadvantaged groups.⁷⁵ Indeed, Janelle Scott, Tina Trujillo, and Marialena Rivera assert, "TFA relies on elite policy entrepreneurs to enact its vision in formal policy making."⁷⁶ In this way, TFA's initial focus on equity and inclusion for marginalized groups, the makings of a *counter-public*, was eclipsed over time by its partnerships and networks with elite policy entrepreneurs who helped to shape its vision of education reform. An example of this includes shifts in TFA's early discourses, from one that focused on aiding hard-to-staff public schools to one that emphasized its ability to *outperform* district teachers on standardized measures of performance. In view of such changes, I argue that TFA's deliberative practices, and its influence in the public sphere, foster what Fraser describes as a "liberal bourgeois public"⁷⁷ that does not challenge either state powers and leaders or hegemonic narratives about achievement and mobility in U.S. society. Indeed, since its entrepreneurial networks are primarily within the private sector, though supported by state actors, its collective sense of "we" is largely inaccessible to historically marginalized parents and families to which the organization orients its service. In the absence of building the power of ordinary people to participate in educational change and reform, TFA loses its ability to promote critical forms of democratic

participation. Nonetheless, its opposition to the educational status quo and to the inertia of state bureaucracies, which propels it to participate in new models educational delivery via hybrid forms of public and private schools, makes it a distinct and alternative teacher public.

<1>Discussion and Conclusions</1>

Public school teachers work closely with ordinary members of the public. While they are formally state actors employed by the government to carry out functions of local, state, and federal mandates, teachers are also members of society and are positioned in unique ways to shape local ideas, practices, and aspirations for change in their public institutions. The Chicago Teachers Union and Teach for America are examples, in the form of organizations, of teachers' influence in the public sphere — what I call teacher publics. Their expansive networks, both locally and nationally, help to shape discourses regarding, and aspirations for, change in public schools. They are also often the subject of (or participants in) rigorous debates and deliberations about the current and future functions of public schools.

Yet public spheres are meant to serve critical functions. Distinct from state apparatuses of control, the public sphere should ideally cultivate not only rich debates and interrogations of state leaders and institutions, but it should also build the power of ordinary members of society to participate in civic life and strengthen democracy. In this essay, I have argued that CTU's participation in the public sphere facilitates its more critical functions, thus it approximates a *counter-public* in that it serves the counterhegemonic purposes of challenging state elites by recognizing and building power among typically marginalized groups, such as its rank-and-file members and the students and families they serve.⁷⁸ TFA, in contrast, exerts a powerful influence on ordinary members of the public, who either know or have been taught by a corps member, but it does not emphasize critical forms of participation by or with the public. Its strategies for change emphasize individual achievement and social mobility through education, and thus it prioritizes partnerships with elite groups to reorganize schools in a quasi-market of competition based on standardized measures of achievement. In light of its approach, I argued that TFA approximates an *alternative-public*, which works to change state-run systems of schooling on behalf of the public, but does so by empowering

nonstate actors in the private sector. This approach, paradoxically, weakens opportunities for democratic participation by the historically marginalized groups the organization seeks to serve.

Generally, in societies as vast and diverse as the United States, notions of a singular or unitary public are untenable, complicated by stratifications and hierarchical relations of power that privilege some voices and silence others. The teacher workforce is no different. Distributed across a highly unequal and segregated landscape of schools with varying levels of resources, teachers' realities, and the realities of their students, are wide-ranging, preventing singular ideas about the needs of public schools. It is not surprising, then, that multiple groups, with *divergent* ideas about public institutions, would emerge in the public sphere; in this sense, CTU and TFA are exemplars. But as multiple publics emerge, signaling new categories of "we" among teachers, not all teacher publics promote democratic participation and greater access to decision-making about public education. As Nancy Fraser warns, the semi-autonomous spaces of deliberation that publics carve out do not *automatically* lead to access and equality for subaltern groups.⁷⁹ Indeed, teacher publics, even those that aim to serve students and families otherwise marginalized or silenced in the public sphere, can work unwittingly to legitimize and perpetuate hegemonic forms of state power by failing to promote or create opportunities for civic engagement and participation. For this reason, Fraser's notion of counter-publics, wherein the voices of underrepresented groups are amplified in public deliberations and serve to challenge discourses that reflect liberal bourgeois interests and experiences, is useful.

When applying this framework to CTU and TFA, one can see implications for their modes of activism. While CTU developed within the structure of labor unions, its organization embraces social movement unionism, which combines its focus on labor politics with broader social and civil rights.⁸⁰ Moreover, CTU's approach to activism adopts *organizing* as a core strategy for change; this distinguishes it from groups whose primary strategies for change are advocacy and mobilizing, which are often reactionary, episodic, and issue-bound, and may serve to maintain elite forms of power among privileged groups.⁸¹ Organizing, on the other hand, is fundamentally about "understanding the power structures of ordinary people and how they themselves can come to better understand their own power."⁸² For instance, while beholden to the legal parameters of bargaining,

CTU has found ways to educate its members about the connected struggles of urban teachers and the communities they serve, identifying sources of influence and creative repertoires of engagement to challenge and change policies that adversely affect both teaching and learning.⁸³ As a union focused on social justice, CTU represents an “intra-public”⁸⁴ niche within teacher unions across the country. These groups challenge older approaches to unionism, typically understood to focus narrowly on the concerns of middle-class teachers and to operate as undemocratic, top-down bureaucracies. CTU, and other unions like it, disrupt these norms by not only amplifying issues of inequity in society, but by also enlisting marginalized groups to challenge structures that maintain inequity, including threats to locally controlled democratic systems of schools.

TFA, on the other hand, developed independent of teacher unions, amassing new cadres of teachers and leaders, and promoting new discourses about teaching and public schools. TFA’s network is prodigious enough to signal an “inter-public”⁸⁵ competition with traditional teacher associations, such as unions, in terms of influencing how new generations of teachers understand their professional identity and the expectations and demands they have of the state. Unlike CTU, however, TFA’s participation in the public sphere is less disruptive. Indeed, rather than engage in critical deliberations about the state, TFA tends to withdraw from public forms of contestation, aligning instead with philanthropists and entrepreneurs in the private sector, and partnering with new school models managed by private groups to place its recruits. While these actions are transformative in the sense that they shift the role of districts as central managers of public schools, TFA’s efforts do little to build trust and confidence in institutions managed by elected members of the public. In the absence of contestation of the state, and due to an outsized emphasis on individual responsibility, state and collective responsibility grows anemic.

Hence, as distinct teacher publics, the strategies CTU and TFA use to effect educational change have quite different consequences for the democratic functions of public schools. The value of political dissent, as noted in my discussion of Stitzlein’s work, is that it can cultivate rigorous and worthwhile debate, and ultimately build trust in state authority and government if concerns are heard and adequately responded to. Even in the face of intransigent state actors, *public* forms of

dissent can spur movements and campaigns for new entrants into state bureaucracies, such as the hundreds of teachers who ran for political office in the wake of teacher walkouts in 2018, inspired to play a more central role in educational policymaking. As Stitzlein argues, dissent — whether in the form of deliberations, negotiations, and even bitter contests such as strikes — can strengthen the legitimacy of the state when it ultimately gains the consent of the governed.⁸⁶ In the event that state actors are viewed as imposing decisions on stakeholders, or operating indifferently to the public's call for greater resources or for changes in core practices, vigorous dissent can serve as a “public check on officialdom.”⁸⁷

But as alternative teacher publics such as TFA grow, it is unclear how these groups will exert pressure on state actors to obtain consent from stakeholders, such as the students and families that utilize public schools and services. While market advocates suggest that parents can exercise choice as a form of consent, choice is often a private act rather than a public practice that invites open reflexivity with other stakeholders to deliberate about the organization of schools and school practices. Importantly, though, the *publicness* of public schooling lies in its capacity to bring individuals into an awareness of their common fates and the interdependence of their realities.⁸⁸ In this way, the publicness of CTU's activism, and its orientation to social movement unionism in particular, is most ripe for the collective forms of reckoning that are necessary to foment a sense of shared fate and common struggle on the part of parents, teachers, students, and communities.

1. Maya Riser-Kositsky, Madeline Will, and Daarel Burnette, “Over 150 Teachers Are Running for State Office: Here's What We Know About Them,” *EdWeek*, July 17, 2018.
2. Jess Bidgood, “West Virginia Raises Teachers' Pay to End Statewide Strike,” *New York Times*, March 6, 2018.
3. *Janus v. American Federation of State and Municipal Employees, Council 31*, No. 16-1466, 585 U.S. ____ (2018).
4. *Janus* deemed the requirement for all workers (both union members and nonunion workers) to participate in collective bargaining to be a form of compelled political speech. On these grounds, the

Supreme Court expanded nonunion workers' First Amendment rights by allowing them to opt out of fees that support collective bargaining activities.

5. This form of withdrawal refers to patterns of "exit" on the part of teachers and parents who leave traditional public schools for privately managed public schools or other school models that are beyond the purview of local control and oversight. I recognize, however, that withdrawal can also refer to the withdrawal of one's work, in the form of strikes and work stoppages. However, I consider the latter withdrawals as public forms of protest that are intentionally *not* private and that typically do not advance privatization.

6. The risk of overinterpretation is strong here, as many teachers may not actively "choose" schools or affiliations with unions, but are instead circumstantially employed due to availability of work and the existing norms and labor agreements in their state and district.

7. For more information on this, see Jane F. McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Tom Alter, "'It Felt Like Community': Social Movement Unionism and the Chicago Teachers Union Strike of 2012," *Labor Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 10, no. 2 (2013): 11–25; and T. Jameson Brewer, Julian Vasquez Heilig, Michelle S. Strater, and Jitu Brown, "Chi-Town Educator and Community-Based Activism: Confronting a Legacy of Education Privatization in the Nation's Windy City," *Thresholds in Education* 41, no. 3 (2018): 138–153.

8. My interest in CTU and TFA developed prior to the 2018 statewide walkouts. During the walkouts, however, these groups came to exemplify more clearly dual and competing forms of activism through CTU's support of and participation in public forms of protest and TFA's more reticent, ultimately prohibitive, stance toward the walkouts for its corps members.

9. While teachers are also state actors, they are usually positioned in inferior ways, tasked with implementing policies and practices but not with determining or constructing policies. This inequity seemed to spur many teachers to run for political office in 2018, in hopes of directly shaping district and state education policy.

10. Michael Apple, *Educating the "Right" Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality* (New York: Routledge/Falmer, 2001).
11. *Ibid.*, 31–48.
12. Julia Evetts, "A New Professionalism? Challenges and Opportunities," *Current Sociology* 59, no. 4 (2011): 406–422.
13. Steven C. Ward, "The Machinations of Managerialism: New Public Management and the Diminishing Power of Professionals," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 4, no. 2 (2011): 205–215.
14. See more on this in Wayne Au, "Teaching under the New Taylorism: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of the Twenty-First Century Curriculum," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 43, no. 1 (2011): 25–45; and Tina Trujillo, "The Modern Cult of Efficiency: Intermediary Organizations and the New, Scientific Management," *Educational Policy* 28, no. 2 (2014): 207–232.
15. Gary Anderson and Michael Cohen, "Redesigning the Identities of Teachers and Leaders: A Framework for Studying New Professionalism and Educator Resistance," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 23, no. 85 (2015): 3.
16. *Ibid.*
17. McAlevey, *No Shortcuts*, 1–26.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Jonna Perrillo, *Uncivil Rights: Teachers, Unions, and Race in the Battle for Equity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
20. Jerald Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill–Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).
21. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
22. Sarah M. Stitzlein, "Improving Public Schools through the Dissent of Parents: Opting Out of Tests, Demanding Alternative Curricula, Invoking Parent Trigger Laws, and Withdrawing Entirely," *Educational Studies* 51, no. 1 (2015): 58. Here, Stitzlein draws on an argument from Chris Higgins and Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "What Makes a Public School Public? A Framework for Evaluating the Civic Substance of Schooling," *Education Theory* 61, no. 4 (2011): 375.

23. Stitzlein, "Improving Public Schools through the Dissent of Parents," 58. Here, Stitzlein draws on John Dewey's description of participatory democracy in *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Swallow Press, 1954).

24. Tina Trujillo and Michelle Renee, "Irrational Exuberance for Market-Based Reform: How Federal Turnaround Policies Thwart Democratic Schooling," *Teachers College Record* 117, no. 6 (2015): 1–34.

25. Stitzlein, "Improving Public Schools through the Dissent of Parents," 57–71.

26. Ibid.

27. Doris Santoro, *Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2018).

28. Ibid., 49.

29. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

30. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Context* no. 25/26 (1990): 57.

31. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, xviii.

32. Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 61.

33. Ibid., 67.

34. Vanessa Siddle-Walker, *The Lost Education of Horace Tate: Uncovering the Hidden Heroes Who Fought for Justice in Schools* (New York: The New Press, 2018).

35. Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 65–66.

36. Julian Vasquez Heilig and Su Jin Jez, *Teach For America: A Return to the Evidence* (Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center, 2014). Retrieved May 27, 2020, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/teach-for-america-return>.

37. "Our Journey with Diversity and Inclusiveness," Teach For America (2015).

38. I have challenged TFA's diversity initiatives, describing them as "paradoxical" in light of the organization's expansion into urban districts where the number Black teachers has declined, due in large part to school closures in urban districts and accountability-driven sanctions. While TFA

maintains that it does not displace teachers, I have argued that its role as a leader in policy and advocacy has failed to address the adverse racialized impact of current policy. For more on this, see Terrenda White, "Teach For America's Paradoxical Diversity Initiative: Race, Policy, and Black Teacher Displacement in Urban Schools," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 24, no. 16 (2016): 1–37.

39. Megan Blumenreich and Bethany L. Rogers, "TFA and the Magical Thinking of the 'Best and the Brightest,'" *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 24, no. 13 (2016),

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.24.1926>.

40. Michael C. Barnes, Emily K. Germain, and Angela Valenzuela, "Teach For America's Long Arc: A Critical Race Theory Textual Analysis of Wendy Kopp's Works," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 24, no. 14 (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.24.2046>.

41. Kerry Kretchmar, Beth Sondel, and Joe Ferrare, "Mapping the Terrain: Teach For America, Charter School Reform, and Corporate Sponsorship," *Journal of Education Policy* 29, no. 6 (2014): 742–759.

42. Higgins and Knight Abowitz, "What Makes a Public School Public?," 375.

43. See Harry Boyte and Nan Skelton, *Reinventing Citizenship: The Power of Public Work* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), cited by Higgins and Knight Abowitz, "What Makes a Public School Public?," 375n25.

44. McAlevey, *No Shortcuts*, chap. 4.

45. Ibid.

46. Elizabeth Todd-Breland, *A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago Since the 1960s* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

47. Ibid., chaps. 1, 2, and 3.

48. Ibid., chap. 4.

49. Ibid., "Introduction," 5.

50. Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 76

51. Brian Jones, "Keys to the Schoolhouse: Black Teachers, Privatization, and the Growing Teacher Rebellion," in *What's Race Got to Do with It? How Current School Reform Policy Maintains Racial and*

Economic Inequality, 2nd ed., ed. Bree Picower and Edwin Mayorga (New York: Peter Lang, 2020), 63–86.

52. For more information about the history of radical activists who pushed unions to include Black workers (including the efforts of the Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO] in the late 1930s), see Jones, “Keys to the Schoolhouse.” For a full history on Black workers and labor, see Joe William Monroe Trotter, *Workers on Arrival: Black Labor in the Making of America* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

53. Richard B. Freeman, “Unionism Comes to the Public Sector,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 24, no. 1 (1986): 41–86.

54. King’s speech is quoted in Michael K. Honey’s *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaigns* (New York: Norton, 2011), 27.

55. Jones, “Keys to the Schoolhouse,” 82.

56. Freeman, “Unionism Comes to the Public Sector,” 41–86.

57. Michael B. Katz, Mark J. Stern, and Jamie J. Fader, “The New African American Inequality,” *Journal of American History* 92, no. 1 (2005): 75–108.

58. For more on activist traditions of black teaching, see the following texts: Adrienne D. Dixon, “‘Let’s Do This!’: Black Women Teachers’ Politics and Pedagogy,” *Urban Education* 38, no. 2 (2003): 217–235; Scott Baker, “Pedagogies of Protest: African American Teachers and the History of the Civil Rights Movement, 1940–1963,” *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 12 (2011): 2777–2803; Vanessa Siddle-Walker, “Original Intent: Black Educators in an Elusive Quest for Justice” (*Brown Lecture*, presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, DC, October 26, 2012); and Melanie Acosta, Michelle Foster, and Diedre F. Houchen, “‘Why Seek the Living among the Dead?’ African American Pedagogical Excellence: Exemplar Practice for Teacher Education,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 69, no. 4 (2018): 341–353.

59. Indeed, the number of Black teachers declined in the mid-twentieth century, due in large part to desegregation plans that resulted in the closing of segregated Black schools by white district leaders. At the same time, new professional opportunities (in both public and private sectors) became

available to Black college graduates in the wake of civil rights movement and its victories. Lastly, in the late twentieth century new licensure policies, based on standardized tests, created additional barriers to employment for graduates of teacher education programs. For more information on these policies, see Jones, "Keys to the Schoolhouse," 63–86; and Wayne Au, "High Stakes Testing: A Tool for White Supremacy for over 100 Years," in *What's Race Got to Do with It?*, ed. Picower and Mayorga.

60. Terrenda White et al., "Education Policy and Black Teachers: Perspectives on Race, Policy, and Teacher Diversity," *Journal of Teacher Education* (2019): 1–15,

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487119879895>.

61. Albert Shanker Institute, "The State of Teacher Diversity in American Education" (2015),

<http://www.shankerinstitute.org/resource/teacherdiversity>.

62. White et al., "Education Policy and Black Teachers." See also Kristen L. Buras, *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

63. Janelle Scott, Tina Trujillo, Marialena D. Rivera, "Reframing Teach For America: A Conceptual Framework for the Next Generation of Scholarship," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 24, no. 12 (2016): 2.

64. James Cersonksy, "Teach for America's Deep Bench," *American Prospect*, October 24, 2012,

<https://prospect.org/education/teach-america-s-deep-bench/>. See also Teach for America, "Teach for America: 2014 Annual Report," 2014.

65. Teach for America, "Teach for America: 2014 Annual Report."

66. Kretchmar, Sondel, and Ferrare, "Mapping the Terrain," 743.

67. *Ibid.*, 748–756.

68. *Ibid.*, 742.

69. Kenneth M. Zeichner, *Independent Teacher Education Programs: Apocryphal Claims, Illusory Evidence* (Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center, 2016). Retrieved May 27, 2020, from

<http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/teacher-education>.

70. *Ibid.*, 5.

71. *Ibid.*

72. Anderson and Cohen, "Redesigning the Identities of Teachers and Leaders."
73. Tina Trujillo and Janelle Scott, "Superheroes and Transformers: Rethinking the Role of TFA's Leadership Models," *Phi Delta Kappan* 95 (2014): 57–81.
74. Ibid.
75. Kretchmar, Sondel, and Ferrare, "Mapping the Terrain."
76. Scott, Trujillo, and Rivera, "Reframing Teach For America," 23
77. Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 59.
78. Ibid., 61.
79. Ibid., 67.
80. McAlevey, *No Shortcuts*, 1.
81. Ibid., 4.
82. Ibid., 3.
83. Ibid., chap. 4.
84. Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 65–66.
85. Ibid., 66.
86. Sarah M. Stitzlein, *Teaching for Dissent: Citizenship Education and Political Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 13.
87. Higgins and Knight Abowitz, "What Makes a Public School Public?," 373.
88. Ibid.