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# Beyond the consumer: parents, privatization, and fundraising in US urban public schooling

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**ABSTRACT**

Given recent budgetary gaps in public education, many civic and educational leaders have relied upon private sources of funding for US public schools, including funds raised by parents. Yet parents' role as economic actors in public education has been largely unexplored. Drawing from a qualitative study of parent engagement, fundraising, and school change in Chicago public schools, I explore the educational investments of a largely White group of middle- and upper middle-class parents and how they understand their collective engagement in relation to educational disparities. The findings show that parents were not only consumers through school choice, but also economic brokers of private capital via their fundraising efforts and producers of urban school change. Despite their stated commitments to public education and desire for diversity, most parents worked with and for a more *selective* public in their school change efforts, exacerbating resource disparities in the segregated urban district. The findings highlight the tensions and equity issues that arise when White, economically advantaged parents are positioned as consumers within neoliberal urban educational contexts while simultaneously called upon to support, sustain, and improve the public schools they choose for their children.

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## Introduction

> I don't think we should be relying on business … But you're in a position where you're in between a rock and hard place. Are you going to take a principled stand on public education, or get funding for your school? … Most people are focused on doing the best thing for their child at that time, and aren't going to spend a lot of time on how this may affect the broader system. (Margaret, public school parent)

In a context of shrinking school district and state education budgets, many leaders have turned to private sources of funding for public schools in the United States, particularly those located in large urban districts.[1] Much of the scholarship on privatization and education has focused on testing and accountability, district governance, charter schools, and the influence of corporate elites and philanthropists (Buckley, Henig, and Levin 2010; Buras 2012; Burch 2009; Koyama 2010; Saltman 2010; Watkins 2012). The school fundraising of middle- and upper middle-class parents – and particularly those in urban districts – has been relatively unexplored, however, even as parents are leveraging unprecedented sums of money to pay not only for band equipment or field trips, but for core academic programs and teacher salaries in traditional public schools (Bello 2010; Calvert 2011; Koumpilova 2011; Tucker 2013). As the president of the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) stated, 'We see

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an ever-increasing need for parents to go above and beyond the call of duty … School districts can't keep the cuts out of the classrooms' (Bello 2010). Although funds from foundations and independent parent fundraising groups still comprise a small share of school budgets in the United States, the fact that schools are relying upon these funds to sustain core academic programs suggests a shift in the relationship between the state and its citizens in the realm of public education.

In the United States, large parent donations and extensive fundraising are commonly associated with private or suburban public schools serving predominantly White and affluent families. Yet, recent examples in large urban districts – those challenged with issues of poverty, historic disinvestment, and a declining tax base – suggest that a growing number of middle- and upper middle-class parents are working to make a select number of city public schools viable options for their children (Billingham and Kimelberg 2013; Cucchiara 2013b; Cucchiara and Horvat 2009; Stillman 2012). These parents – mostly White – hold the potential to bring much-needed resources to schools serving low-income students in districts with large budgetary gaps and financial challenges. As local and ostensibly 'grassroots' actors, parents may be more aware of the needs of individual school communities than philanthropists or corporate elites, with the promotion of high-quality schooling, rather than profit, being their primary goal.

Yet, much of the existing literature suggests that White middle- and upper middle-class parents, in particular, commonly work in ways that serve to advantage their own children and contribute to educational inequality, despite their best intentions and stated commitments to public education (Ball 2003; Brantlinger 2003; Cucchiara 2013b; Lewis and Diamond forthcoming; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011; Roda and Wells 2013). As Reay, Crozier, and James (2011) found in their research in the United Kingdom, White middle-class parents who went 'against the grain' and chose socioeconomically and ethnically diverse urban public schools for their children had more instrumental orientations than communitarian ones, with school diversity often valued for the extent to which it provided their children with 'multicultural capital' that would further advantage them in their future education and careers. In other words, parents' private interests trumped their commitments to the public and collective good.

As state disinvestment in public education creates new conditions for capital accumulation and the influence of the private sector in the United States (Peck and Tickel 2002), it is important to understand how economically advantaged parents – influential actors in urban educational landscapes – understand, negotiate, and shape the increasingly blurred lines between public and private in urban schooling. Doing so can reveal tensions and equity issues engendered by neoliberalism as already advantaged parents take on new roles as 'volunteer subject-citizens' (Hankins 2005) in increasingly privatized, local educational contexts.

Drawing from a qualitative study of parent engagement and public school transformation in Chicago, I examine the educational investments of a predominantly White and upper middle-class sample of parents who sought to support and improve their children's racially and socioeconomically diverse public schools. I also explore how parents understood their roles, responsibilities, and actions in relation to educational disparities within district and state contexts. My research, although exploratory, suggests a relatively unexamined and yet important area of inquiry in the literature on middle-class parents and city public schooling: the multiple, and often mutually influential, roles these parents can play as *consumers* (e.g. via school choice), *economic brokers* of private capital via their fundraising efforts, and *producers* of urban school change. By economic brokers, here I mean individuals who solicit funds for schools (e.g. via fundraising groups) and act as intermediaries between donors and school leaders.

For the White parents in the study, their efforts to 'improve' their local public schools through their economic brokering and collective engagement – and that of other parents 'like them' – influenced their decision to choose (and continue to support) a school in which their own children were racial and class minorities. Yet, despite their stated commitments to public education and desire for diversity, most parents worked with and for a more *selective* public in their school change efforts, exacerbating resource disparities in the segregated urban district. I argue that parent fundraising within

underresourced urban districts represents a racialized neoliberal relationship between citizens and the state, as White middle- and upper middle-class parents are courted as 'valued customers' (Cucchiara 2013b) who are simultaneously called upon to support, sustain, and improve the very educational institutions they choose for their children.

## Middle-class parents and urban school reform

Middle-class parents (and particularly White middle-class parents) are often discussed in the urban education literature in relation to their 'exit' or absence from urban public schools. Yet recent news articles, anecdotal accounts, and empirical studies in both Europe and the United States focus on a different phenomenon: that of middle-class parents enrolling their children in – and often working to improve – historically low-income or socioeconomically mixed city public schools.[2] Laudatory accounts of middle-class parent engagement in urban schools characterize parents as benevolent citizens, positioning them as civic actors working on behalf of a broader school community in ways that benefit not only their own child, but poor and working-class children as well (Edelberg and Kurland 2009; Petrilli 2012).

A growing body of scholarship, however, suggests that although middle-class parents can bring valued resources to underresourced urban schools, there are also some costs. Much of this research explores the choices, values, and actions of White middle- and upper middle-class parents in city schools, showing that these parents may exacerbate race and class inequalities and create new patterns of marginalization in school and district contexts through their choices and engagement (Ball 2003; Kimelberg and Billingham 2013; Cucchiara 2013b; Hassrick and Schneider 2009; Posey-Maddox 2014; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011; Van Zanten 2003). In a neoliberal era marked by competition and individualism (Apple 2006; Ball 2003; Hursh 2005), these parents often carve out privileged spaces for their children within diverse school and district contexts via mechanisms, such as tracking and schooling for 'gifted' children (Kozol 2005; Roda and Wells 2013). Similarly, research exploring the relationship between neighborhood gentrification and school change suggests that an influx of middle-income households in neighborhoods does not necessarily translate into academic gains for low-income students in the local schools (Keels, Burdick-Will, and Keene 2013). Indeed, the school choices of new and more affluent residents can ultimately render 'good' schools less accessible to low-income families via assignment policies and practices that favor the gentry (Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden 2013; Posey-Maddox 2014).

Less is known, however, about the economic role of middle-class parents in urban school transformation. The limited research on voluntary contributions to public schools in the United States has largely focused on the types and economic impacts of voluntary contributions made via foundations and Local Education Funds (LEFs).[3] More recent scholarship has explored the economic contributions and equity implications of venture philanthropy in urban districts (Buras 2012; Saltman 2010, 2012; Scott 2009). While some scholars have explored broad issues of accountability, equity, and transparency in philanthropic initiatives (Buhl and Rothman 2011; Reich 2005), questions remain as to how local actors understand and participate in these fundraising efforts. The sociocultural dimensions of parent fundraising, particularly in the context of neoliberalism and privatization in public education, remain largely unexplored.

## Neoliberalism, privatization, and parents

Over the past three decades, neoliberalism – based upon the belief that social, economic, and political success is best achieved through free markets, unrestricted flows of capital, and free trade – has profoundly shaped educational policies, governance, discourse, and ideology in the United States and abroad (Apple 2006; Harvey 2007; Hursh 2005; Lipman 2011). Neoliberal education frameworks treat privatization, choice, competition, and accountability as necessary components in educational transformation. State involvement in schooling is viewed as less effective than private involvement, with neoliberal advocates privileging reform agendas driven by private actors seeking to make public education more 'efficient' and responsive to the needs of consumers (Lipman 2011; Ross and Gibson

2007). Yet the state is not absent in neoliberal reforms – rather, these reforms require that the state create conditions that facilitate capital accumulation and support private interests through deregulation, cuts to social services, and the privatization of public enterprises, goods, and services (Hackworth 2007; Harvey 2007; Lipman 2011; Ross and Gibson 2007). In this context, education is treated as a private good – a commodity that parents can invest in to maintain or improve their child's status and social position, rather than a public good that has social and collective benefits. Parents' 'consumption' of public schools, via school choice, is key to neoliberal educational reform agendas.

Research on social class, race, and education demonstrates that not all consumers are treated equally or offered similar choices in an educational marketplace, with civic and educational leaders treating White middle- and upper middle-class families as 'valued customers' (Cucchiara 2013b) based upon the assumption that they'll both improve the local schools and revitalize city spaces (Cucchiara 2013b; Gulson 2010; Hankins 2005; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011; Smith and Stovall 2008). Similarly, not all parents exercise choice in the same way or have similar resources at their disposal as White middle-class parents possess a wider range of options, given the multiple forms of capital they possess (Ball 2003; Ball and Vincent 1998; Reay 1998; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2002; Van Zanten 2003). Although White middle-class parents are not a uniform group and may have distinct ideological and political commitments (Cucchiara and Horvat 2009), they are similarly situated in relation to present-day racial structures and systems of domination. As scholars of whiteness have shown, Whites benefit from a racialized system of inequality and often – whether consciously or unconsciously – perpetuate racial domination on individual and institutional levels (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Leonardo 2009; Lewis 2003b). As Johnson and Shapiro (2003) argue, 'Although everyone, to some degree, has constrained choices, whites have relatively more choices and are relatively more able to act on them for themselves and their children. Within these structural circumstances, "choice making" by whites can have very real consequences for the society as a whole' (p. 186). This is particularly true in competitive, neoliberal educational policy contexts such as that in the United States and the United Kingdom, where responsibility for economic and social equality has largely shifted from the state to individual actors (Hursh 2005).

## Data and research methods

The data presented here comes from a qualitative study of middle- and upper middle-class (and largely White) parent engagement in Chicago public elementary schools. The goal of the exploratory study was to examine middle- and upper middle-class parents' role in urban school transformation, and how they understand their engagement in light of segregation and resource disparities within and across district schools. In order to better understand parents' volunteerism and collective organizing within and potentially *across* schools and neighborhoods within a shared district context, I sought to compile a sample of parents from a number of elementary schools impacted by both demographic and material changes over the last decade. I targeted parents with children enrolled in schools that gave priority in enrollment to neighborhood residents.[4]

In order to obtain contextual data to inform my sampling (and interviewing) of parent leaders, I compiled a list of all Chicago Public Schools (CPS) neighborhood elementary schools that had experienced a decline (10% or more) in the percentage of low-income students between 2000 and 2010. To investigate parental perceptions of 'viable' schools and subtle demographic and material changes that may not appear in an aggregate reporting of school data, I also analyzed newspaper articles, comments about CPS schools on popular parent websites and blogs, and interviewed a staff member of a district-wide parent organization who worked closely with middle- and upper middle-class families.

Guided by this preliminary research, I sought to interview founding or active members of Friends of Groups (FOGs), PTAs, or Local School Councils (LSCs) at schools that were viewed as 'viable options' for White middle-class families in Chicago.[5] I used purposive sampling methods, given my specific focus on the meaning-making, volunteerism, and fundraising of middle- and upper middle-class parents.[6] I recruited parents for the study through contacts made at a citywide school options fair as well as via parents' own suggestions of other parent leaders in their social networks within and across district schools.

The data presented in this article draws from in-depth interviews with nine parents of children enrolled in five separate CPS elementary schools.[7] In addition to a decline in low-income students, four of these schools had a growth of 10% or more in the percentage of White students between 2000 and 2010, with their White student populations in 2010 ranging from 33 to 61%. Although an in-depth analysis of the relationship between neighborhood gentrification and school demographic shifts is beyond the scope of this study, many of these schools were located in neighborhoods that had experienced a growth in higher income residents over the last decade. Two parent leaders had children attending a predominantly low-income school that was newly 'on the radar' of White middle-class families in its demographically shifting neighborhood, and as such provided an opportunity to understand an early stage of parents' efforts to transform their local public school.[8]

The data also includes an interview with a staff member of a citywide parent organization that worked closely with prospective and current middle-class parents and was also a parent herself. All but one of the participants (10 in total) were White and upper middle-class (with one middle-class Latina), and seven were employed full-time. Two parents identified as male and eight as female. Two parents were educational researchers, and thus spoke about the broader district educational landscape in addition to their experiences with their children's school.[9]

In semi-structured interviews, I asked parents about their school volunteerism, their motivations for getting involved in (or founding) their parent organizations, and their views on school funding. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h and were transcribed. Data collection also included participant observation at a school options fair for prospective parents sponsored by a citywide parent organization, in which I had numerous conversations (documented via field notes) with principals and parents about demographic shifts and schools in the district. I also engaged in participant observation at a workshop for CPS parents interested in transforming their local schools.

Although fundraising was not a primary focus of the original research, parents' role as economic actors, particularly via FOGs, surfaced as a central theme as my data collection and analysis progressed. I thus expanded my data collection and analyzed Internal Revenue Service 990 forms (for tax-exempt, non-profit organizations) for FOGs connected to the schools in the study as well as websites and mission statements for individual FOGs. I also conducted follow-up interviews (ranging from 40 to 70 min) with a sub-group of six parents to further explore the economic role of parents in processes of school transformation. Data was collected from September of 2011 through May of 2012. My own positionality as a light-skinned, African American and White woman and professional likely shaped my research findings and analysis. My race and class, and the fact that I revealed I'm a parent myself may have played a role in the rapport I was able to establish with participants, despite my status as an outsider to the district and city context. To address threats to analytic and theoretical validity, I wrote multiple analytic memos related to emergent themes and coding categories, and looked for both confirming and disconfirming evidence for the patterns I identified in the data (Miles and Huberman 1994). I also discussed my preliminary analyses with several parent participants (e.g. 'member checks') as well as with colleagues who were both researchers and parents of children in Chicago.

## Chicago Public Schools

As the third largest district in the United States, CPS presents a unique opportunity to explore the tensions and contradictions that can arise in the context of neoliberal educational reform. CPS has long been at the center of debates about the future of public education, with a history marked by teacher strikes, unprecedented school closures, mayoral control, the proliferation of charter schools run by for-profit educational management organizations, and massive budget cuts (Lipman 2011, 2013; Shipps 2003; Smith and Stovall 2008). CPS also has a long-standing history of racial and socio-economic segregation accompanied by significant opportunity gaps and educational disparities across district schools. The majority of schools on the south side of the city serve predominantly low-income African-American and Latino students and have been adversely affected by school closures, the proliferation of charter schools run by for-profit education management organizations, and sanctions under No Child Left Behind's system of high-stakes accountability (De la Torre and Gwynne 2009;

Lipman 2011, 2013). In contrast, a number of schools on the north side of the city have experienced an infusion of resources and significant changes in the racial and socioeconomic demographics of their student populations between 2000 and 2010, with at least nine elementary schools (eight north or west of downtown) experiencing a decline of 35% or more in the number of students designated as low-income. During the year of data collection (2011/2012), White students comprised less than 10% of district students, and yet the percentage of White students in many of the highly sought-out elementary schools north of downtown was above 50%. Although these changing school populations have not uniformly corresponded to the gentrification of many Chicago neighborhoods over the last two decades (Keels, Burdick-Will, and Keene 2013), several neighborhood schools have nevertheless experienced significant demographic shifts as more middle- and upper middle-class and White families – from both within and outside of school catchment zones – choose these schools for their children.

Amidst these demographic shifts in enrollment, CPS faces continual challenges in meeting the needs of all students due to limited funds. In 2011, for example, the state of Illinois ranked 49th in public funding for K-12 education (Understanding the Chicago Public Schools Budget 2011). Similarly, in a study examining the fairness of school funding in the United States, Illinois received a grade of 'F' based upon its regressive funding system that provided high-poverty districts with less state and local revenue than low-poverty districts (Baker, Sciarra, and Farrie 2010). The district receives close to 30% of its funding from state aid, and in 2011, during the period within which the research was conducted, the state of Illinois owed CPS over 200 billion dollars (Understanding the Chicago Public Schools Budget 2011).

Schools on the north side of the city are not immune to district and state budget shortfalls, and yet many of these schools are able to compensate for budgetary gaps through parent fundraising and volunteerism via parent-run FOGs and foundations for individual schools. During the time of the research, many of the public schools in CPS with art, music, and full-day kindergarten were those with education foundations that could garner funds to pay for teacher salaries as funding for these programs was not guaranteed by the district (although starting in 2013 CPS funded full-day kindergarten for all district elementary schools). According to a newspaper article on funding disparities in CPS, for example, the combined net assets for foundations and 'Friends of' charities connected to seven highly sought-out CPS schools exceeded 2.2 million at the end of 2010 (Hood 2011).

States vary in the parameters they place on private donations, and Illinois leaves it up to districts to determine how they will address individual, corporate, and philanthropic contributions. According to the director of LSC relations (quoted in a 5/9/10 Chicago Tribune article), the district only requires that donations be approved by a school's LSC and administration. There are no regulations on the type or amount of funds FOGs can raise for individual schools, and FOG and foundation boards ultimately retain the power to decide when to release funds and for what purposes. As 501c3, non-profit organizations, these fundraising bodies are distinct from school-based groups such as LSCs and PTAs, and are not subject to the same levels and types of school oversight in terms of transparency, governance, and democratic deliberation. Although many parent fundraising organizations work collaboratively with school principals and LSC members to determine the use of FOG dollars, this is not always the case. The board of an education foundation that raised funds for a CPS elementary school, for example, refused to give the school the money it had in cash reserves (totaling more than $300,000), despite specific requests made by the principal and some parent donors for access to the funds (Hood 2011).

The budget shortfalls in CPS are in line with neoliberal urban governance and reform (Lipman 2013), where state austerity measures and the erosion of the public sector create conditions for privatization and 'pay-as-you-go' models of public education. Resources and programs that were formerly common aspects of the school day for public school students in most US school districts – such as art, music, recess, and physical education – are now treated as 'extras' under neoliberal systems of testing and accountability and are increasingly left up to parents to pay (and/or fundraise) for if they want them as part of their child's educational experience (Anderson 2014; Malone 2010; Fang 2013; Fitzpatrick 2013).

## Research findings

### *Courted consumers in urban public schooling*

Middle-class parents were courted by civic and educational leaders – as well as other parents – based upon their potential to contribute time and resources to schools facing significant budgetary gaps. Since 2010, Mayor Rahm Emmanuel has sought to attract and keep middle-class families in the city through the expansion of selective enrollment schools, special curricular programs, and charter schools (Ihejirika 2012). These educational reforms have worked in conjunction with housing and redevelopment initiatives that have targeted middle- and upper middle-class residents and contributed to the gentrification of Chicago neighborhoods (Lipman 2011; Smith and Stovall 2008). Middle- and upper middle-class parents themselves have also targeted the middle-class based upon the assumption that increasing the number of families 'like them' in district schools would result in better quality schooling for *all* children. For example, Nina, a White LSC member, described her volunteerism and that of other middle-class neighborhood parents as benefitting *all* children at her daughter's school:

> Test score [data] or research would say, I'm a college-educated mom, my kids will be college-educated. It's just sort of what the research shows. So if I can influence kids who don't have those same probabilities, to increase those kids' odds of being college-educated, then that's sort of part of my lefty belief system. Um … and what I think about public education in general is that a high tide raises all boats, and kind of, makes me feel good about it.

This sentiment – that a growth in middle-class families will have a collective benefit – was also reflected in my interviews with many parent leaders as well as on online parent discussion forums.

A citywide school options fair, organized by an organization for Chicago parents, highlights the efforts that parents and school leaders in non-selective, neighborhood schools engaged in to court 'neighborhood' families with young children. At the fair, prospective families (a largely White group) visited the booths set up by both public and private schools in the city. Public schools were in the minority at the fair (only 17 public vs. over 80 private), and the majority of public schools represented were located on the north and west side of the city in demographically shifting or predominantly upper middle-class neighborhoods. Most schools had colorful flyers with photos of children and information about their art, music, or language programs.

My one-on-one conversations with several of the principals and parents representing public elementary schools at this fair, as well as the demographics of the families in attendance, demonstrated that economically advantaged 'neighborhood' parents (most of whom were White) were the primary focus of schools' outreach efforts. Similar to other studies of White racial attitudes and discourses (see, e.g. Bonilla-Silva 2001; Lewis 2003a; Pollock 2004), few White parents or school leaders in the study used explicitly racial terms, but instead employed 'covert, indirect, and apparently nonracial language to state their racial views' (Bonilla-Silva 2001). Whites' desire for more 'neighborhood' families was in most cases used as a euphemism to describe a disproportionately White, upper middle-class group, given neighborhood racial demographics and home values on the north side of the city. When I mentioned my interest in CPS schools that were experiencing demographic shifts and a growth in enrollment, for example, one White parent who worked with CPS families navigating the enrollment process explained that the 'the goal is to get parents to consider their neighborhood school … it's a trend I love seeing.' One school had a sign saying 'let's make [our school] a viable option for our kids,' with two White women energetically talking to a White prospective parent about the school's curricular program. Similarly, a White principal described her school to the cluster of prospective parents in front of her school's table, stating 'we're really going through a nice transition right now, getting more parents from the community around the school.'

A number of these schools were in fact successfully attracting a more White and affluent group of families, evidenced by the demographic shifts these schools were experiencing and the 'buzz' on parent websites and online forums. Matthew, a White LSC member and FOG leader who was representing his child's school at the fair, explained that enrollment applications at his child's school have 'increased by 40–50% each year.' He stated that last year, they had 250–300 applications and only had 40–50 slots available. When I asked if there were shifts in the demographics of the school population over

the past five years, he explained that the changes are most noticeable by grade as the lower grades at the school are 'primarily White middle-income families and the upper grades are primarily Hispanic low-income families from outside the neighborhood.' Like Matthew, many of the parent leaders with children in demographically shifting schools described noticeable variations by race and class across the grades, with the new 'neighborhood families' described as a largely White and more affluent group than students and families in the upper grades (many of whom resided outside of the neighborhood enrollment zone).

Ironically, the growth of middle- and upper middle-class families in these schools was often accompanied by an increased emphasis on parent fundraising to support academic programs. Myrna, a middle-class Latina LSC parent leader, explained how the demographic shifts impacted funding at her child's school:

> Well, because the demographics changed, one of the things is we lost our federal funding. Uh, so then it became a struggle … that was one of the first LSC meetings I remember attending was, when we lost all this money and yet we still needed money to run the programs, and there was no money for extra programs. Uh, so that has been I think one of the biggest hurdles that we've had to get over, where we lost this money, but we had to replace it with donations. Fundraising. And the first couple of years were really hard, to bring that money in. I think now people are just throwing their money at [the school] because they feel so lucky that they did get into the school.

As Myrna outlines, an increase in more affluent students made it more difficult for schools to retain their public (Title 1) funding, prompting their increased reliance on the support of those parents who, in Myrna's words, were 'throwing their money at the school' to fund academic and enrichment programs.

As their low-income student population declined, many schools like the one Myrna's child attended worked to fill the resultant loss of Title I funds through fundraising. FOGs were a primary means by which parents sought to make up for declines in federal and local funding and to support programs and material resources that were not guaranteed by the district (but were common in many of the highly sought-out public and private schools in the district). Middle- and upper middle-class parents – both those with children already attending a district school and those with younger children who were considering their local school – moved beyond school PTAs and LSCs to establish independent groups solely devoted to raising funds to create and/or maintain 'viable' school options for their children.

### *The creation of 'public school plus' options*

Many parents in the study – through their volunteerism and fundraising with *other* White upper middle-class parents – played an influential role in the remaking of their local public schools. Although most parents in the study were, as one principal said, 'critical consumers' of schools, they weren't simply consuming the options available to them – they were *producing* new opportunities for themselves and other parents like them through their volunteerism and fundraising efforts. As with other studies of White middle-class parents with children in US urban public schools (Billingham and Kimelberg 2013; Cucchiara 2013a; Stillman 2012), White parents described their own engagement and that of other parents 'like them' as important in managing the potential 'risk' of enrolling their child in underresourced urban public schools in which White middle-class children were in the minority.

While these parents were 'urban-seeking' rather than 'urban-fleeing' (Butler and Hamnett 2010), most saw their own volunteerism and social networks with other parents 'like them' as key to managing the uncertainties associated with having their child in a CPS school. FOGs, in particular, were a key point of attraction for wary parents, as they provided some assurance that a CPS school would become (or remain) an acceptable option for their children. Matthew, for example, explained that the schools in the district with large FOG budgets had become 'public school plus' options. Describing one of the top fundraising FOGs in the district, he stated:

> They had a model where they called it a public school plus – give us your money and time to make this somewhere between a public and a private school. I recognize that that's what needs to happen to meet the standards of the parents in the neighborhood.

As Matthew noted in his interview, many 'neighborhood' parents – which he described as largely White professionals – were willing to donate money to their local public school in order to ensure that the

school's academic program met their standards. It's important to note here that for most schools in CPS, the 'plus' included academic offerings such as art, music, and full-day kindergarten that are a regular part of the school day in more resourced districts, rather than add-ons or special programs. Yet in CPS – and in what appears to be a growing number of US districts facing budget shortfalls – these elements of children's education were treated as 'extras' (see, e.g. Armario 2012; Bello 2010).

Having an active FOG also served as symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984; Swartz 1998) within the district landscape, as it provided some assurance in parents' minds that a school was 'good enough' or would improve in the future. A White mother who was representing her child's school information booth at the citywide parent fair, for example, explained that FOGs serve as a point of attraction for prospective families in the district. She said that many schools have them because 'when parents tour the school, they want to meet the parents and make sure we're sharing the same initiative.' Similarly Jennifer, a White Chicago parent and staff member of a citywide parent organization, stated that having a FOG was key to attracting parents and getting them involved in the public schools:

> I also think it's parental, like that Friends of Group is super important. When there's a Friends of Group, I think more people are willing to get involved. I mean, no one wants to *be the first one* [emphasis added], but when they find that there's a group that they can join and go to a meeting and find out more, that makes a huge difference.

Although few parents used explicitly racial labels, the parents they described – parents 'like them' or 'neighborhood parents' – implied a largely White and upper middle-class group based upon the demographics of the neighborhoods and organizational groups they referenced. As the literature suggests, a cadre of 'active' and organized White middle-class families often signifies school quality and improvement and elevates a school's status amongst other White 'choosing' parents (Lewis 2003a; Posey 2012; Roda and Wells 2013).

In interviews and in online postings about the local schools, parents described their efforts (and that of others) to remake their local schools through an infusion of private capital. According to Melissa, a White FOG founder and parent of a child in what she described as an 'up and coming' school, 'a lot of the 'it' CPS schools, they had FOGs … you've got to donate money to get the kind of programs that we want, and it was just sort of, you know, if you're a good school, you have a FOG.' As reflected in the quote by Melissa, there was the assumption made by many parents that they would need to pay (and/or fundraise) in order to customize their child's education to meet their standards of 'good' public schooling. Although most parents voiced commitments to public education, they equated quality schooling with the presence of private capital, given current gaps in public funding.

Indeed, FOG parents played a key role in securing and maintaining resources for their children's elementary schools. In four out of the five schools studied, parents raised between $65,000 and $250,000 annually via online donation sites, corporate sponsorship, and silent auctions. Parents used their cultural and social capital to garner support from local civic leaders as well as high-level district staff, resulting in physical upgrades to schools or the adoption of new programs. Several also secured sponsorships from local celebrities and elites, garnering thousands of dollars for individual schools. These funds were commonly used to pay for physical upgrades (such as new playground equipment), staff salaries, and academic offerings. Parents' brokering of these private funds required a specialized set of skills – grant writing, creation of websites and marketing materials, and solicitation of support via high-status social networks, among others – which made it unlikely that low-income and working-class parents would participate in FOG activities.

Parents did not simply work within the boundaries of their own schools and neighborhoods, they also connected with other economically advantaged parents across the north side of the city, often in private settings such as homes or online parent groups. When asked about their efforts to transform their local schools, for example, parent leaders explained that they had either communicated with other parent groups at different schools and learned of the process or obtained information from their professional contacts. Abigail, a White member of a neighborhood parents group that was influential in attracting more neighborhood families to her local school, explained parental connections across schools:

> The work we did, we didn't do in a vacuum, right? This sort of stuff is happening everywhere. So it's not as if we totally invented this concept on our own. We drew on all these people at [name of highly competitive northside school] and, you know, tried to figure out how it had worked [for them]. And then as we started rolling, then other people started noticing … then they said, 'Hey, can you … can we pick your brain on some stuff and they'd come to [our school]… So it's schools that were the same size, had in many ways similar neighborhoods in that they were either middle-class neighborhoods, or neighborhoods that were already primed for … uh, renewal … the demographics of the neighborhoods were all different, and the players on the ground were very different, but the challenges that they faced were sort of all the same. Like it was just as – the same across the board.

As Abigail describes, her neighborhood parent group learned from parents at what she later called the 'golden' public schools in the district, and subsequently passed on this knowledge to other schools in neighborhoods that were largely White and middle-class or, as she described, 'primed for renewal' based upon a growing interest of middle-class families. Highlighting parents' organizing and information-sharing across schools, she also described a parent-led fundraising seminar attended by 200 people representing more than 60 different schools. Abigail's description of parents' information-sharing in neighborhoods 'primed for renewal' here is striking as it suggests a connection between urban school and neighborhood gentrification via parents' school choices and fundraising efforts. Her language also suggests that this 'renewal' was not simply about class but about whiteness as well, as the 'golden schools' that she and other parents were learning from were those that had the greatest numbers of White and middle-class families in the district. Although several parents critiqued the popular, selective enrollment schools for being too White, too affluent, and too competitive, their efforts to learn from and network with other White upper middle-class parents in more elite schools suggests that their school transformation efforts were in large part about increasing the number of parents 'like them' in their local schools.

Matthew also explained how he learned from the fundraising efforts of FOG leaders at the more elite schools in the district, ultimately developing a fundraising strategy that targeted a select group of families who could donate large sums. As he described, he asked the school community to 'please donate to the school … for every dollar donated it will be matched by these 10 families who have committed to pledge up to $1000 a piece.' Using this strategy, the school's FOG raised a total of $18,000 in their first year as an organization, and the funds raised grew over time. By the 2009–2010 school year, for example, they had raised $65,000.

Parents also communicated across schools via an online social networking and communication forum for FOGs, and many had met other parents through a fee-based citywide parent organization that coordinated play groups and school information sessions for families with young children. They also worked with other parents in their school community, communicating via listservs or meeting in local cafes, at the school site, or in parents' homes to strategize about ways to support their local school. These collective efforts to create 'public school plus' options with parents of similar race and class backgrounds – often in private or exclusive settings – played a key role in parents' decision to enroll their child in a CPS and stay, rather than opting for private or suburban options.

### *Parental role and responsibility in a context of budgetary gaps*

Parents critiqued what they saw as state and local disinvestment in public education while also soliciting private capital and engaging in unpaid labor to fill resource gaps at their child's school. Most critiqued the disparities in per-pupil funding across Illinois districts as well as what they saw as the mismanagement of funds and budgetary gaps in Chicago schools over the last decade. Several expressed their discomfort with schools' use of corporate donations and private capital to fund curricular and enrichment programs. Many parents felt that funding staff salaries and curricular offerings was beyond their responsibilities as parents, and should be supported by public funds.

Margaret, a White LSC member and founding member of a FOG, expressed her concerns:

> I mean at the school, we the parents fund the music program – so there's no music unless the parents fund it. And it's the second year that the parents have funded a full technology position. So obviously funding positions seems like a bad precedent to set – it's certainly my belief that parent fundraising should be for extra things, like trips for the kids and stuff like that … but at our school because of the cuts we've funded [music and technology] positions.

For Margaret, parent fundraising should be for 'extras' like field trips, rather than used to fund core aspects of school curriculum and instruction. Similarly, Matthew stated:

> And based on my research before I got involved, I understood that was the model for urban education – to have this high level of parent involvement, which is kind of ridiculous when you compare it to suburban schools and towns. Which is ridiculous, aren't you paying taxes? But I recognized that that's the way it has to be.

Like most participants, Matthew expressed his criticisms of the type and level of engagement asked of parents, and yet nevertheless viewed it as necessary to ensure his children received an adequate education within district schools.

In several of the schools that lost Title I funds as a result of their demographic shifts, kindergarten parents were asked to make a suggested contribution of $1500–2000 per family to fund full-day kindergarten, as at that time that the district only paid for a half-day of instruction. Whereas FOG parents like Matthew and Heidi described the soliciting of parent funds as unfortunate but just 'the way it had to be,' given budget cuts, other parents resisted efforts to solicit individual donations for full-day kindergarten. Beth explained how she was 'turned off' by the level of fundraising at her child's school. When the school asked if parents would be willing to donate more than $1500 to help fund a full-day kindergarten staff position, she voiced her discontent:

> I sent around an email to our class saying that I was troubled by what amounted to a privatization of a public school. And that frankly I did not think our kids were the ones who needed full-day kindergarten, this was an awful lot of money to be raising for a school that was really pretty well-funded, and doing okay, and had kids whose parents had other options. A couple of parents wrote back and said, 'Thank you for saying that, I was troubled by this too.' And a couple parents wrote and said, 'But don't you understand, it's really all about money, you always have to pay for your public schools to make them function.'

Beth went on to explain that despite the cautionary words and critiques made by herself and several other families, the school ended up raising close to $125,000, enough to fund full-day kindergarten.

Margaret was also opposed to asking parents to fund full-day kindergarten, describing how she and other parents with similar philosophies had been able to 'hold the line' at their school and resist having to ask individual parents:

> Other schools in the neighborhood do a big fundraising campaign and communicate to parents that they need to donate a certain amount of money or else there won't be full-day kindergarten at the school. And I think, I maintain that schools are doing that just because it's a great pressure point and they can get the money out of the parents … the school has a big, it's a big budget, there's money here, there's money there, you can allocate money here and not allocate money there, so I think it's done, you know, because it's a really effective way of raising a lot of money quickly. And we've not done that my child's school: in the last two years there's been, like, pressure to do it and the parents in the Friends of Group will say, 'Well, you know, we're falling behind. Other people are doing this, I mean.' There are more parents involved in the Friends of Group who think, 'Well, a school's a business, I'm a businessperson, I just have many, I have great ideas about, you know, let's do some long-term planning. Why can't we do more long-term planning?'

Margaret went on to explain her concerns that some of the new parents at the school were trying to 'create their own little private school within the public school system,' prioritizing fundraising over diversity and inclusiveness.

Some parents – all mothers – described their volunteer work as equivalent to a part-time job on top of the unpaid care work or paid employment that they were already engaged in each week. Most had full-time jobs, and described the challenges they faced as women juggling work, volunteerism, and family time (see also Lareau and Weininger 2008). Heidi, a White founding member of a Friends-of organization who organized major fundraising events for her child's school and also worked full-time, described how her efforts to support her child's school sometimes limited her ability to support her child's education in other ways:

> I can't always help with homework, because I'm at a meeting at school … That's not the right dynamic. I mean parents should be heavily involved in their child's education … but if you can't sit with your child and help with homework because you're at the school trying to raise $10,000, there's something wrong with that equation.

Whereas calls for more parental engagement are often made based upon the assumption that they'll benefit parents' own children, for Heidi, her fundraising activities took away from her family time and

home-based efforts to support her child's education. Parents like Heidi had the privilege of choosing whether or not to devote a considerable amount of time and unpaid labor to their children's school, given the economic and social resources at their disposal (e.g. funds to support child care, tutors, etc).

Despite their critiques of the current system, most parents explained that filling budgetary gaps where and when needed was simply part of what it meant to be a CPS parent. When I asked Matthew what he saw as the responsibility of parents in their child's education, he explained that 'if the school system isn't designed or funded or run in such a way to provide a great education for all of the kids, then it's up to the parents to get the school up to speed.' Abigail, speaking about a fundraising workshop she helped to organize, expressed similar sentiments:

> I mean, we can talk about whether asking schools to self-finance is, you know … morally bankrupt. It is – but I don't see the political situation changing anytime soon, so as long as it doesn't, schools need to learn how to do this, otherwise they get left behind.

For Abigail, schools without parents who could fundraise to support staff positions and programs would be 'left behind.' Similarly, Myrna, a member of her school's LSC, stated: 'And it's sad – it's really sad that you have to go through this fundraising, but it's the reality.' Heidi expressed this sentiment as well, stating:

> People that are coming to this school are coming to a great school, and they think it's always going to be great … we are constantly educating our parent base to say this is how we need you involved, we need you … we need people to step up and come to meetings and engage and play a role … it's only great if the parents make it great.

For these parents, the ability to create and sustain a great Chicago public school was largely dependent upon the presence of an engaged volunteer labor force that could leverage private funds for academic programs and material resources.

Even those parents who were most critical of parent fundraising and budgetary cuts to public education expressed their doubts that the current system would change. Most of these parents focused their efforts on improving their child's school, rather than working to change district or state funding gaps. When I asked Heidi, for example, if she was involved in any district or state parent organizations related to school funding issues, she explained:

> I know those groups and am supportive of those groups, but there's only so many hours of the day … I'm at the local level right now … I will stay involved no matter what – I wanted to put my time into efforts that would directly benefit my kids.

Although several parents explained that they had participated in district-wide or state rallies for public education, most parents devoted what little free time they had to their own child's school. Many viewed their volunteerism efforts as part of their civic duty or charitable work in the community. Others simply wanted their local school to provide the best education possible for their child, and considered the investments of time and money that they made to their child's school as still much less than the cost of private schooling. The $1500 that some parents donated in support of full-day kindergarten, for example, was still much cheaper than private school tuition. When asked what he saw as the responsibility of the district and the state in relation to public education, Matthew explained:

> The Friends of [Group] and volunteering your time is just an end run around – when things aren't going perfectly, it's another way of going in the back door and helping out. It's imperfect, but that's the way it is. At the local level, it's much harder to get the state and local government to change than it is to have a fundraiser.

In interviews, Matthew and several other parents explained that focusing their volunteerism at their child's school felt more rewarding and would produce more tangible and immediate results than activism at the city or state level. Parents were thus working for both private gains (their own child's education) and a *selective* public – the other children and families in their child's school, rather than the collective (and more economically disadvantaged) district student population.

### *Segregation and resource disparities within and across schools*

Most parents were aware that their engagement and fundraising may contribute to resource disparities across district schools, and yet nevertheless worked in class and race-segregated spaces and

organizations in ways that benefitted their own children's education and that of other families like them. Matthew described the demographics of the parents in the LSC and FOG for his child's school as well as that of the parent groups he encountered across the north side:

> …but I think there is something about all these schools on the north side turning around, and getting the parents getting involved, where it's mostly, you know, middle, middle income, or upper middle income parents. And they're professionals, you know, there's few stay-at-home parents. It's mostly parents who have full-time careers that are involved ... And they're professionals, so they're involved in budgeting and strategic planning and, you know, whatever else in their normal, everyday work life, and so they bring a lot of that to the school … Which I think is a change from the olden days of PTA moms that were stay-at-home generally, and uh, would do some fundraisers, and bake sales, and things like that, but they weren't career people in general.

Here, Matthew describes a shift from what he saw as 'the olden days' of parent involvement to newer and more professionalized forms of engagement that rely upon particular skill sets (e.g. budgeting and strategic planning). This shift in parent participation works in concert with other neoliberal educational reforms, as an 'engaged' parent comes to be defined by the extent to which they fulfill their roles as consumer, donor, and broker of economic resources for public school communities. Participation is thus used in reference to the work of professionals, rather than to the non-economic contributions of public citizens (Lipman 2011; Miller 2007).

Although many of the FOGs held some of their meetings at school sites and included messages on their websites stating that all were welcome to participate, much of parents' initial organizational work occurred outside of schools in private homes, in local cafes, or over parent listservs, email, or social media groups that were relatively inaccessible to working-class and low-income parents. Most FOG members worked most closely with principals, rather than with parents and families whose children had been enrolled at the school prior to middle-class parents' school change efforts. Abigail, for example, described the advice she received from another parent group about how to go about school transformation:

> Basically what they said to us is: 'Don't have town hall meetings, don't, you know, don't do all of that sort of stuff. What you'll do is you'll create factions where there are none. And, um, at the end of the day, you're not going to have anything except a lot of problems. So what you really need to do is build it with your principal, put it on a silver platter. People will either eat, they'll eat less, or they'll walk away from the table. Or you're asked for an appetizer, in which case you'll be delighted to provide it. But at the end of the day, you will have something. And if you try to galvanize the stakeholders who don't matter, you won't have anything to show for yourself. There will be too much dissension.' And that's what the people at [another north side school] advised us.

Abigail and the other parents of her founding group decided to simply, as she stated, 'fly under the radar, and try to hope they didn't notice us.' Following the advice they received, she and a small group of other parents in her middle-class neighborhood worked directly with the school's principal to move forward with the neighborhood parent group's plans for the school by meeting in parents' homes and working outside of existing school organizations, like the LSC.

Not all parent leaders took an intentionally separatist approach, however, as a few parent leaders from other schools described their efforts to build ties to existing parents and families. These parents described the challenges that they experienced in doing so, however, based upon different norms for engagement and tensions linked to race and class. Margaret, for example, described her initial frustration with what she saw as the largely social function of bilingual parent meetings at her child's school, with the school providing food and resources for parents, rather than parents 'giving back' to the school through donations and more traditional forms of volunteerism. She explained that:

> …it seemed really odd to me that, I just wasn't used to this idea that parents would come to the school to get things. That made me sort of uncomfortable. From my, you know, from my social class, I'm like, Oh my gosh, I don't need a turkey. You know? And like I said, the parent culture was, 'We're going to come to the school to get things, but we're not, you know, it's not our job to give back to the school.'

Margaret went on to express her regret for not developing strong ties to the largely Latino parent group at her child's school and solely relying upon Myrna, a middle-class Latina parent she had befriended, to serve as an intermediary between the bilingual group and the predominantly White and middle-class PTA and LSC. She stated:

> …I sort of wish that I had done something different with the [parent group]. I think part of me thought that they should want to participate, and, you know, it shouldn't be my responsibility to go out and somehow bring them in. I felt that … I guess … that's one of my regrets, that I didn't think to somehow try to – I mean Myrna's been in charge of that for this whole time.

Margaret equated 'participation' as 'giving back' to the school through donations of time and money, with parents' participation in bilingual parent advisory meetings not counted as 'real' engagement given that it did not produce an objective, measurable output (e.g. new program or new funds).

Shiela, another parent leader at Margaret's school who was also participating in the interview, responded to Margaret by stating:

> I feel like, I mean, this is going to sound really bad, but I feel like there's kind of this liberal idea of, 'No, we're all the same,' and I think a lot of us … have underestimated the cultural differences, and socioeconomic differences, and maybe didn't want to see all those differences between the Hispanic community and the White community at [the school] … I just remember being so disappointed because I thought, oh we're going to this great diverse school, and yet – it's a little bit better now I think, but yet those things persisted and I think it's kind of the same with the parents, too, except for a very few parents who've kind of made a crossover, and can go freely between both groups, but that tends to be Hispanic parents.

Although in interviews, parents commonly spoke about the school's racial and socioeconomic diversity as an asset to their child's education, like Shiela and Margaret most White parents reflected on the challenges of working across lines of race, class, and language in their volunteerism and fundraising for their children's school.

Parents also acknowledged that their work may contribute to resource disparities across the district. As Heidi stated, 'I think it's surprising to have a school system in which only the schools who are able to raise the most money are able to be successful … they're successful because the money that is raised supplements the curriculum in important ways.' Parents recognized that not all district schools were able to offer physical education, recess, and art, and that much depended upon the fundraising of parents – particularly in demographically shifting schools that had lost their Title I funding. Myrna, for example, stated:

> I don't think education is that important to our politicians and they don't understand that we need to put a little more into the school budgets so that we can have these resources. They're expected to do so much with so little … in the schools that don't have parents like these, I can imagine it can be really stressful.

Parents recognized that their schools had more resources than many other elementary schools in the district, resources that were in large part garnered by parents with the economic, social, and cultural capital to secure them.

In addition to district-wide inequities, parents also spoke about resource disparities across the state, describing differences in per-pupil funding between urban and affluent suburban districts. Margaret, for example, noted that 'In comparison to other states, Illinois relies more on property values to fund schools … I have to think that parent fundraising exacerbates that.' Yet, despite her critiques of parent fundraising and private capital in public education, Margaret felt that it was difficult to reconcile one's principles with the pressing need to fill gaps left by public education funding. As she stated (see opening quote), parents were 'in between a rock and hard place. Most are focused on doing the best thing for their child at that time.'

Margaret and a few other parents sought to reconcile this tension by trying to ensure that resources were distributed equally with their child's school. Shiela and Margaret both voiced their opposition to the creation of a gifted program in their child's school, for example, and Melissa objected when parents sought to dedicate funds raised to their own child's classroom or grade. As Melissa asserted, the school's FOG was 'not just raising money for kindergarten and pre-K,' but 'raising money for the whole school.' She ultimately mobilized FOG support to raise money for the 8$^{th}$-grade class trip (benefitting a predominantly low-income group of students), despite the fact that most FOG parents had children in the lower grades. These were not common practices, however, as many FOGs had fundraising campaigns for full-day kindergarten that benefitted a more affluent group of children (given demographic shifts occurring in the lower grades). Parents also commonly raised money for

programs and resources like art, music, or technology that would benefit their own child (as well as others), attracting other middle-class parents in the district.

Many parents sought to bring in resources and reforms that would, as Nina stated, 'raise all boats,' and yet most moved their agendas forward with little input from or collaboration with the majority low-income and working-class families in their children's school. With few exceptions, parents presumed that the programs and resources they wanted for their own children would be beneficial for low-income children as well. Reflective of a neoliberal ideology, parents like Abigail sought to 'build it' and 'put it on a silver platter,' and families would either 'eat, they'll eat less, or they'll walk away from the table.' In other words, individual 'choice' and the managerialism of 'professionals' (Apple 2006) was privileged over democratic deliberation as the work of professional parents influenced the direction of school change and the range of choices available.

Whiteness was at work here as well, as White parents were able to move their desired reforms forward and work in largely segregated groups, despite their status as racial minorities within most schools and the broader district. Parents had read or heard about resource and funding disparities across CPS schools, yet few had an in-depth knowledge of conditions in other district schools (or collaborations with parents in these schools) within the stratified district context. Although low-income and working-class students of color in their own children's schools may have benefitted from some of their engagement and fundraising, in many cases, these students were declining in number as more White, economically advantaged parents (with priority in enrollment based upon neighborhood residence) sought to enroll their children. Parents, through their fundraising and engagement, were ultimately working with and for a more *selective* public, attracting parents 'like them' to their children's school. As in many urban districts, whiteness serves as a form of symbolic capital, as 'whiter' schools are often viewed as 'better' schools regardless of their relative test scores and academic programs (Lewis 2003a).

## Discussion

The research findings challenge dominant neoliberal framings of middle-class parents in urban educational 'marketplaces' as parents didn't simply consume what urban schools and districts had to offer, but also worked – collectively – to make their local schools fit for their consumption. Parents' navigation of their multiple roles as consumers, economic brokers, and producers of change highlights the tensions and contradictions that can arise under neoliberal educational reform efforts as well as shifting boundaries between public and private in urban education. White uppermiddle-class parents in the study were courted by civic, educational, and parent leaders from the urban district while simultaneously asked to contribute their money, time, and resources to ensure that the public institutions they chose remained viable options for themselves and other parents like them. In the context of district and state budgetary gaps, parent volunteerism and fundraising were necessary to ensure that the programs these parents wanted for their child (e.g. art, music, and full-day kindergarten) were sustained over time. Yet parents' collective engagement and fundraising ultimately served a more affluent, White, and *select* public compared to the district as a whole, exacerbating resource gaps across city schools and contributing to what Lewis and Diamond (forthcoming) describe as White middle-class parents' 'opportunity hoarding' in multiracial, socioeconomically mixed districts and/or educational settings (see also Kozol 2005; Roda and Wells 2013; Tilly 1999).

As an exploratory project focused on a particular school district and a small group of parent leaders, the research results are not generalizable to all economically advantaged parents in city public schools. Rather, the major research findings are meant to inform future inquiry. Although newspaper and anecdotal accounts suggest similar trends in other major US cities, further research is needed to identify how particular school and district governance structures (e.g. policies regulating school fundraising) and local contextual factors may shape parental roles and forms of engagement. Future research could also explore the orientations, engagement, and impact of middle-class parent organizing via district and/or statewide campaigns for school funding equity, and how these parent organizers negotiate their collective political work with their personal choices for their own children. A more robust and racially diverse sample of middle- and upper middle-class parents from across an urban

school district (or across multiple districts) may also illuminate more heterogeneous understandings of and responses to budgetary gaps in public schooling. Despite these limitations, the influential role that parents played in urban school transformation in the research – particularly as brokers of private capital for public schools – highlights an important area of inquiry for future studies of privatization, neoliberalism, and urban education.

## Conclusion

Middle- and upper middle-class parents can play powerful roles in urban public school transformation, bringing much-needed educational resources and programs to schools in need. The data suggests, however, that there are significant limitations to treating middle- and upper middle-class parent fundraising and volunteerism as an antidote to budgetary gaps in US public education. In a context of rising economic inequality, a 'squeeze' on the middle class, and a growth in family work hours, fewer parents may be able to volunteer long hours at schools and fundraise to fill the resource gaps left by local and state governments (Duncan and Murnane 2011; Jacobs and Gerson 2004). Although almost all of the parent leaders in the study were employed, their professional occupations provided them with both high-status social networks as well as economic capital that greatly aided their volunteerism and fundraising efforts. Parents without this social, cultural, and economic capital – those working long hours in low-wage jobs and without a disposable income – are unlikely to contribute in the same way as their sacrifices of time and money are qualitatively different than that of more affluent parents (see also Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2013). The sustainability of private capital (and individual parent volunteerism) is also not guaranteed as much depends upon the fluctuations of the market and/or the commitments of individual donors. Curricular or staff changes could easily catalyze middle-class parent 'flight' from these schools, with parents taking their social and economic capital with them to suburban or private schools.

Relying on parents to help fund academic programs also raises questions about democratic participation and decision-making in public education as parents who make large donations may feel they are entitled to a greater say in school matters. Whereas proponents of market-based reforms might argue that parent fundraising is more efficient and effective, in that it allows parents to 'pay-as-they-go' and customize their child's education, rather than relying on seemingly bureaucratic funding structures, the research findings suggest that democracy and equity may be sacrificed in the name of efficiency. Many parent leaders worked closely with school principals to decide upon the use of funds raised, but in most cases, low-income and working-class families were not a part of these deliberations. Parents' planning and collective engagement efforts often occurred in segregated, private spaces (e.g. homes, online listservs or social media groups, neighborhood cafes) frequented by other parents 'like them,' rather than in more public, accessible, and diverse forums and institutional settings. Although FOGs helped to support programs like art that benefitted all students, other financial decisions – such as that to fund full-day kindergarten – largely benefitted the lower grades (who in most schools were disproportionately White and middle-class compared to the upper grades). The research highlights the need for future studies to consider if and how parent fundraising impacts parent–parent and parent–teacher relationships and power dynamics in school settings.

School-based parent fundraising and extensive volunteerism can also exacerbate existing disparities in resources and educational opportunities within and across segregated schools and districts. Although parents' fundraising may bring new resources to some schools, it can render them less accessible to lower income students as more middle-class parents consider them viable options for their children and receive priority based upon residence (see Cucchiara 2013b; Posey-Maddox 2014). It can also serve as an avenue through which to further advantage White middle-class children by ensuring that they are provided with educational opportunities similar to their peers in private or more affluent school settings while also gaining 'multicultural capital' in diverse schools that will benefit them in an increasingly globalized and multiethnic world (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011). As

research has demonstrated, even well-meaning White middle-class parents with a desire to contribute to the common good still struggle to reconcile their moral commitments with their efforts to ensure their own child has every advantage and opportunity in increasingly competitive and individualistic neoliberal educational landscapes (Brantlinger 2003; Lewis and Diamond forthcoming; Posey-Maddox 2014; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011).

Lastly, the findings demonstrate the role middle-class parents may play (despite their best intentions) in support of privatization, suggesting a need for more consideration of parent fundraising in studies of neoliberalism, school finance, and market-based educational reforms. While growing attention has been paid to the actions and influence of venture philanthropists and education management organizations in public education, few studies have considered how middle- and upper middle-class parents navigate and shape increasingly privatized educational arenas. The goal here is not to vilify individual White middle- and upper middle-class parents, but rather critically examine how their individual choices and engagement efforts intersect with broader structural inequalities in urban school districts and neoliberal educational policy contexts. Cuts to traditional public school budgets, for example, create the conditions for parents with the economic, cultural, and social means to do so to take up economic matters formerly managed and supported by the state. As Hankins (2005) argues, the devolution of governmental investments in public education can facilitate greater parental influence over the education of *other* people's children, reflecting 'changes in citizen rights and practices that have arisen under neo-liberalism' as parents take up roles traditionally held by the state (44). Research in other urban districts is thus needed to uncover the extent to which middle- and upper middle-class parent fundraising and volunteerism serves as a counterweight to the corporatization and marketization of public schooling, and/or simply another mechanism of social reproduction within neoliberal educational reforms.

## Notes

1. For more detailed descriptions of education budget shortfalls in states and local districts, see Johnson, Oliff, and Williams (2011) and PEN (2011).
2. See Billingham and Kimelberg (2013, 2013b); Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden (2013); Cucchiara and Horvat (2009); Reay, Crozier, and James (2011); Stillman (2012).
3. Local Education Funds (LEFs) garner public resources to support public schools and generally focus their efforts on district education reform initiatives and public engagement. Public Education Funds (PEFs), such as individual school and district foundations, typically solicit private dollars to supplement public education funds (Buhl and Rothman 2011; see also Addonizio 2000; Brunner and Imazeki 2005; Mertz and Frankel 1997; Zimmer et al. 2003). Researchers studying private funds for public schools generally rely upon annual reports from non-profit, tax-exempt LEFs and individual school and district foundations. Research using these reports has shown a growth in the number of organizations raising private funds for public schools since the early nineties as well as a growth in total revenues. One study found a 290% increase in the number of school foundations between 1991 and 2001, for example, with a 190% growth in revenues during that same period (Lampkin and Stern 2003.
4. The district has a complex student assignment policy, where parents can 'choose' from a number of options, including charter, neighborhood, magnet, and selective enrollment schools. Students residing in a neighborhood school's attendance boundary receive priority in enrollment, whereas other school options assign students based upon a random lottery or exam scores. The enrollment process is marked by anxiety for many parents, and historically many parents with the economic means to do so (and who do not get their top-choice schools) have opted out and send their kids to private schools or move to suburban districts.
5. LSCs in CPS elementary schools are comprised of six parents, two community members, two teachers, one non-teacher staff member, and the school principal. LSC members are responsible for approving and monitoring how funds are used, selecting and evaluating school principals, and developing and overseeing school improvement plans (http://www.cps.edu/pages/Localschoolcouncils.aspx).
6. I draw here from other studies that distinguish upper middle-class parents from the more general middle-class, based upon the former's educational credentials, occupational prestige, and the economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital they possess (Brantlinger 2003; Cucchiara 2013b).
7. Two sets of parents (a married couple and two parent leaders) were interviewed together as per their request. All names are pseudonyms.
8. The specific demographics of individual schools are omitted in order to protect the anonymity of participants.

9. I was first introduced to these educational researchers via a mutual professional contact, which may have influenced what they were willing to share with me. Perhaps as a result of their own research as well as their knowledge of mine, they (unlike other participants) used academic words like 'privatization' and 'neoliberal.' As both educational researchers and CPS parents participating in the school choice process, however, they spoke freely about the tensions they felt in trying to reconcile their ideological commitments (e.g. related to equity and collectivism) while also doing what they felt was best for their own children within a stratified district context.

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