

---

# Democracy & Education

---

## The Cake is a Lie

### A Book Review of *The Failure of Corporate School Reform*

By K. J. Saltman, Review By Amy Rector Aranda

---

**P**ONDERING THE MULTIPLE facets of education is an age-old endeavor; however, in the 20th century, it became a science . . . literally. Stemming from pioneering work in scientific curriculum design by Bobbitt (1918) that likened knowledge production to efficient industrial production, the dominant paradigms in school development and reform have tended toward that which could be easily measured and systematized and done so in the most economical way. Never have we seen this more powerfully than in today's standards movement, high-stakes policies, and a businessification of education that prioritizes economic ends over their intellectual means. Far from visions of schooling that center on treating each individual child to a holistic, personally relevant experience that engages his or her critical, moral, relational, cultural and democratic capacities (Counts, 2013; Dewey, 1916; Nussbaum, 2007), education policy has tended in recent years to emphasize fixed, prescribed content and a "banking model" of pedagogy (Freire, 1970/1993), now imposed and enforced, ironically, in the neoliberal educational "marketplace."

With several years of these policies now behind us, many scholars and researchers have justly criticized this push for broad curricular and pedagogical standardization, devaluing of teacher experience and teacher education, high-stakes testing and accountability, overemphasis on competition, and general privatization of educational public goods, most of which have conveniently created lucrative opportunities for businesses, politicians, and philanthropists who only claim to be working toward educational excellence and social equality (Aronowitz, 2004; Au, 2009; Ben-Porath, 2013; Giroux, 2005; Lipman, 2009; Saltman, 2009, 2012; Stovall, 2013). Despite these reforms' overall failure to meet even their own minimal criteria of increased test scores and cost savings, such agendas persist and thrive. As a critical scholar, Saltman sees this perpetuation as proof of a different intent—the reforms have wildly

succeeded in covertly preserving a dual system of public schooling between the haves and the have-nots that also ensures corporate profits in the short term through pillaging of public education funds, and profits in the long term by cultivating an uncritical and exploitable future workforce. Neoliberal, entrepreneurial dogma is imposed under the pretense of rescuing a supposedly failed public system while in reality delivering much of the same to the already underserved and marginalized children in these schools.

In the introduction to his book *The Failure of Corporate School Reform*, Saltman (2012) recollects the various titles it could have had, one of which was *The New Two-Tiered System of Public Education: Privatized at the Bottom*. He chose the title he did specifically to reverse the rhetoric of "failure" being hurled at public schools. He contends that claims about our schools failing were exaggerated in the first place, and that because it has largely ignored the real reasons schools were ever actually suffering, corporate school reform is what is actually failing. In my own musings on what should be the title of this review, the one I chose comes from a popular video game in which the player is made to solve dangerous physical puzzles by an ill-intentioned artificial intelligence that promises the player cake if she succeeds—the player eventually

---

AMY RECTOR ARANDA earned her master's in educational studies from the University of Cincinnati and is currently nearing completion of her doctorate in educational and community-based action research with a secondary focus in curriculum studies there. She writes and researches on issues of student voice, agency, empowerment, and critical consciousness; democratic, relational, and critical theory and pedagogy; and covenantal, feminist, and communitarian research ethics.

encounters graffiti left by previous subjects warning, “The cake is a lie” (Valve Corporation, 2007). This parallels the way educators and students are now constantly jumping through reformers’ hoops in anticipation of improved opportunity or some other sort of success or reward, when in reality, as Saltman shows and as other scholars have been warning, such shallow processes could never truly overcome the societal and structural obstacles to tangible equity, possibility, and empowerment. The metaphorical cake promised by corporate school reform is a lie.

I could have easily called this review “You Had Me at the Title” or “You’re Preaching to the Choir.” Clearly written for the critical pedagogue and lover of democratic education, Saltman’s (2012) points are not only painfully observable in the current climate of schooling but equally straightforward so as to be easily and understandably summarized within the first few pages. Nevertheless, to drive the arguments home, and for readers less familiar with critical theory and all the goings-on in educational corporatization, Saltman explicates his stance in the chapters that follow, ending up with a worthwhile read for anyone truly concerned about the implications of these reforms on societal well-being and educational justice for all students.

Saltman (2012) sets the stage by explaining the main principles and conduits of corporate reform, highlighting the myths and realities behind its proponents’ claims to fame. Chapter two reveals these reforms’ failure to produce legitimated evidence of success in implementation, a trend particularly exemplified by urban portfolio districts. Chapter three frames what he calls the “new market bureaucracy,” which has curiously replaced the traditional educational bureaucracy reformers professed to be eliminating. In chapter four, the author calls for more democratic pedagogy, and demonstrates how some liberal critics are actually making things worse because they ignore the crucial issues at stake. In the last chapter, Saltman offers a reconceptualization of education that recovers its critical and progressive roots, with a grounding in fresh ideals of a global commons.

### **Reform Portals that Lead to Nowhere**

Calling on this movement’s own gold standards of success—namely student achievement on standardized tests, and cost reduction—Saltman (2012) begins by illuminating the evidence that school closures and “turnarounds,” charter schools, voucher programs, for-profit management companies, and other forms of privatization have failed to deliver these outcomes. He details how the positivistic premises of objectivity and evidential validity that are regularly applied to undergird these policies and practices should then apply to the reforms themselves, yet the call for empirical evidence is consistently answered instead with ideological spin, rationalized away as impossible or inapplicable, or blatantly ignored by proponents. The reformers have apparently assumed exemption from meeting the same standards that justified their private takeover of public educational institutions in the first place.

Supporters of these reforms persist despite this clear lack of evidence, invoking and reaffirming the neoliberal market approach that has visibly failed to keep its promises both in education and in the broader society. Far from providing a springboard for progress,

innovation, and mobility, in the past few decades neoliberal policies have instead contributed to growing race, class, and economic stratification, and the repurposing of democracy to mean the rights to consume and to pursue individual interests at the expense of the common (Giroux, 2005; Saltman, 2012). What Saltman calls the “new market positivism” is a paradoxical stunt of monumental proportions. As he so concisely puts it:

*The new market positivism is characterized by a triumph of irrationalism under the guise of efficiency; audit culture and unaccountability at the top masquerading as accountability; extension of repressive bodily and hierarchical institutional controls defended through reference to freedom and opportunity; anti-intellectualism and destruction of conditions for creativity pushed on the basis of the need to produce creatively minded workers and entrepreneurs; and a denial of intellectual process, curiosity, debate, and dialogue justified on the basis of intellectual excellence. (p. 73)*

As other authors have also described, adherents to this ideology enact policies that preserve an already offensively disproportionate distribution of educational resources, effectively increasing the opportunity gap (Buras, 2013; Donnor, 2013; Stovall, 2013). Extensively using the extreme corporatization examples of the Recovery School District charter takeover of the New Orleans school system after Hurricane Katrina and the Renaissance 2010 program in Chicago, Saltman illustrates how easily these kinds of reforms can imitate progress without actually delivering it.

Saltman (2012) goes on to question why a movement bent on ridding the system of its traditional bureaucracy has instead positioned a whole new kind of bureaucracy that shifts funding upward into administration and confiscates the appropriate powers and agency of actual educators, turning them into “paper-pushing ‘edupreneurs”” (p. 66). Justified by economic rationales—“the possibility of upward economic mobility and the necessity of global economic competition” (p. 65)—and meritocratic premises that essentially deny societal and structural influences on educational attainment, purportedly objective and neutral quantifiable measurement devices are employed to maintain this new establishment.

*Social justice . . . becomes an individualized pursuit in which disciplined consumption of preordained knowledge creates the possibilities for inclusion into a social order presumed to be fundamentally just . . . This conception of social justice has no sense of transforming the culture to value dissent, disagreement, difference, and dialogue, which are the lifeblood of democratic social relations. (pp. 75-77)*

He also confronts the mainstream liberal commentary on corporate reform, charging that it espouses the same faith in fictitious knowledge neutrality and promotes “accommodation of the individual to the existing economic and political order” (p. 100).

Saltman (2012) advocates a more critical pedagogy, seeing critical consciousness as vital to a vibrant democracy. “What has to be planted in the ashes of the failed corporate model is a

reinvigorated collective commitment to critical forms of public schooling that can be the basis for expanding genuine democracy throughout all institutions, the economy, and the culture” (pp. x–xi). His final chapter lends hope to this, a new common school movement that truly prioritizes the common values in human experience.

## References

- Aronowitz, S. (2004). Against schooling: Education and social class. *Social Text*, 22(2), 13–35.
- Au, W. (2009). *Unequal by design: High-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ben-Porath, S. (2013, May). Deferring virtue: The new management of students and the civic role of schools. *Theory and Research in Education*. doi:10.1177/1477878513485172
- Bobbitt, F. (1918). *The curriculum*. Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press.
- Buras, K. L. (2013). Let's be for real: Critical race theory, racial realism, and education policy analysis (toward a new paradigm). In M. Lynn & A. D. Dixson (Eds.), *Handbook of critical race theory in education* (pp. 216–231). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Counts, G. S. (2013). Dare the school build a new social order? In D. J. Flinder & S. J. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader* (4th ed., pp. 45–51). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Donnor, J. K. (2013). Education as the property of Whites: African Americans' continued quest for good schools. In M. Lynn & A. D. Dixson (Eds.), *Handbook of critical race theory in education* (pp. 195–203). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum. Original work published 1970.
- Giroux, H. (2005). Kids for sale: Corporate culture and the challenge of public schooling. In H. S. Shapiro & D. E. Purpel (Eds.), *Critical social issues in American education: Democracy and meaning in a globalizing world* (pp. 143–162). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Lipman, P. (2009). Beyond accountability: Toward schools that create new people for a new way of life. In A. Darder, M. P. Baltodano, & R. D. Torres (Eds.), *The critical pedagogy reader* (2nd ed., pp. 364–383). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nussbaum, M. (2007). Cultivating humanity and world citizenship. *Forum Futures 2007: Exploring the Future of Higher Education*, 37–40.
- Saltman, K. J. (2009). Schooling in disaster capitalism: How the political right is using disaster to privatize public schooling. In S. L. Macrine (Ed.), *Critical pedagogy in uncertain times: Hope and possibilities* (pp. 27–54). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Saltman, K. J. (2012). *The failure of corporate school reform*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Stovall, D. (2013). Against the politics of desperation: Educational justice, critical race theory, and Chicago school reform. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(1), 33–43. doi:10.1080/17508487.2013.739192
- Valve Corporation. (2007). *Portal*. [software]. Bellevue, WA: Valve Corporation. Available from <http://www.valvesoftware.com/games/portal.html>.