

AI Schooling and the Stratified Educational Ideological Apparatus: Education in the Post-Liberal Turn

Kenneth J. Saltman

University of Illinois Chicago

In Austin, Texas, Alpha School markets itself as the future of education – the first school taught by AI. Students complete core academic subjects through adaptive software in two hours each morning, while adult “guides” oversee rather than teach conventional classes. The remainder of the day centers on workshops in entrepreneurship, public speaking, coding, motivation, and other so-called life skills. Alpha presents this model as personalized, optimized, radically efficient, and free from the boring and meaningless experience of traditional schooling. Academic learning becomes a technical problem delegated to the technology products of corporations, while corporate entrepreneurial formation becomes the primary human work of the school (Alpha School n.d.; Feathers 2025).

Across policy forums, venture-capitalists, philanthropists, and technology marketers herald AI as the long-awaited disruption of schooling. Personalized learning will replace one-size-fits-all instruction. Data will close achievement gaps. Automation will liberate students from outdated pedagogies. Yet most AI schooling does not represent a break with the past. It intensifies longstanding reactionary institutional logics of positivism, instrumental rationality, standardization, and depoliticization as well as the digital privatization of public schooling, commercial contracting, and the capture of valuable student-manufactured data. Much of what AI schooling accomplishes is the automation of the neoliberal standards-and-accountability movement, which sought to standardize and homogenize knowledge while displacing political

conflicts over curriculum and educational purpose with the language of neutral expertise, measurement, and efficiency.

AI schooling does not, however, transform education uniformly. Corporations extract profit from class-differentiated forms of AI schooling in different ways. Across the class hierarchy, AI schooling produces profit through differently weighted combinations of extraction: ruling and professional class families and schools are sold premium forms of individualized advantage (Alpha School described in the opening charges from \$40,000 to \$75,000 a year depending on campus), while under-resourced systems are sold scalable technologies of automation, monitoring, and cost containment; across both, students' activity generates commercially-valuable data that enable corporate profit. In ruling class schools, AI more often remains a selective and supplementary tool for institutions that retain a priority for investment in teachers with pedagogical autonomy and humanistic orientations.

AI schooling also reorganizes pedagogical authority and promotes different forms of agency across classed and racialized educational institutions. In many working-class schools, district leaders, state officials, and vendors use adaptive platforms to intensify remediation, measurement, surveillance, and algorithmic management eroding teacher autonomy and preventing critical educational engagement, though students and teachers continue to reinterpret and resist these uses. Professional-class schooling cultivates a specifically corporate entrepreneurial agency organized around innovation, optimization, self-branding, venture creation, and competitive adaptation. The use of AI in schooling for the ruling class more fully preserves access to interpretive authority, pedagogical autonomy, humanistic knowledge, institutional confidence, and preparation to exercise power.

Together, these differentiated formations constitute what I call a stratified educational ideological apparatus. The concept does not describe a machine that mechanically produces predetermined subjects. Rather, it names an uneven institutional arrangement that distributes pedagogical conditions, interpretive authority, and institutionally preferred forms of agency along classed and racialized lines. Schools remain sites and stakes of social struggle. The question is not whether students possess agency, but which forms of agency educational institutions foster, which they tend to constrain, and which forms of knowledge and authority different groups can access.

In addition to reproducing class-differentiated modes of agency and means of extraction, AI education deepens and automates the ways neoliberal educational privatization and standards-based accountability reduce the capacity of public schooling to function as a site and stake of social struggle by undermining the possibilities of critical and democratic pedagogical practices in working-class schools. It supplants teacher autonomy and pedagogical authority, removes the teacher as a potential transformative intellectual, and automates banking education. It undermines dialogic knowledge production and democratic modes of pedagogy, restricts the capacity of teachers to make knowledge meaningful, critical, and socially transformative by relating claims to truth to experience, to social context, and to the capacity to comprehend and address public problems. What is at stake, then, is comprehending and challenging how AI in its dominant uses further erodes the critical and democratic possibilities of schooling.

Post-Liberalism as a Contested Educational Conjuncture

Post-liberalism names a contested conjuncture in which weakened liberal institutions, continuing neoliberal accumulation and technocratic governance, expanding corporate platform power, and openly authoritarian political projects coexist and struggle for dominance. Accounts

centered on democratic backsliding illuminate the erosion of liberal restraints but can understate the persistence of neoliberal political economy and the growing authority of private technological infrastructures (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Analyses of authoritarian neoliberalism and hegemonic crisis better capture how coercive rule extends rather than replaces neoliberal accumulation (Robinson 2020; Fraser 2019). Post-liberalism operates here as a descriptive and analytic category for this unsettled formation, not as the normative project of right post-liberal thinkers who prescribe tradition, faith, and community as liberalism's successor while leaving the political economy of accumulation largely unexamined (Deneen 2018). Education makes this uneven formation especially visible because these governing logics do not replace one another uniformly; they are distributed differently across classed and racialized institutions.

During the liberal-Keynesian hegemonic formation that extended from the New Deal of the 1930s through the crises of the 1970s, schooling largely reproduced the capitalist order through a hidden curriculum that presented class hierarchy as the consequence of differences in merit, talent, effort, and educational achievement. Schools taught different skills and forms of know-how for different futures of work while cultivating dispositions appropriate to students' anticipated relations to capital. Liberal schooling was never uniformly democratic. It developed through racial segregation, settler colonialism, gender hierarchy, class domination, and the exclusion of many groups from full citizenship. Yet liberal ideology also justified public education through universalizing claims about equality, citizenship, individual and collective development, public reason, and democratic self-government. These promises remained partial and frequently fraudulent, but they supplied ideological and institutional grounds on which students, teachers, communities, and social movements could make demands.

Under the neoliberal hegemonic order, schooling became increasingly organized through depoliticized technocratic governance framed through the supposed efficacy of the private sector. Neoliberal ideology recast market competition, privatization, and managerial efficiency as instruments of choice, opportunity, innovation, and individual advancement. It reimagined schools as competing businesses, teachers as service-delivery agents, students and parents as consumers, and knowledge as a commodity exchangeable for restricted economic uses. Federal and state officials, business organizations, philanthropic foundations, policy advocates, and private vendors institutionalized these commitments through standards, testing mandates, charter expansion, voucher schemes, data systems, and private contracts.

Neoliberalism did not simply disappear when its promises lost legitimacy and came into crisis (Fraser 2019). It helped produce the conditions of the post-liberal conjuncture by evacuating nonmarket values from public life, weakening unions and democratic institutions, and treating public goods as opportunities for private accumulation. Corporate authority and a neoliberal logic now dominate much of education through privatization schemes, for profit contracting, digital platforms, standards, and opaque technical systems. Authoritarian political forces govern more openly through censorship, prohibition, coercion, and restrictions on whose knowledge and histories schools may recognize. Technology vendors, district administrators, and state officials can encode gag laws, curricular censorship, religious mandates, and other political restrictions within educational software while presenting the resulting limits as neutral technical features. Residual liberal commitments also remain, as do organized democratic movements capable of defending and expanding them. The conjuncture remains unsettled because none of these forces has achieved complete hegemony.

AI schooling fits squarely within this contested transformation. It does not carry a predetermined educational politics. Political actors construct its purposes, build its infrastructures, purchase its systems, impose its uses, challenge its authority, and redirect its capacities. However, it has certain tendencies that deepen and automate key features of neoliberal restructuring of education. To understand the class-differentiated forms of AI schooling, we must first examine the institutional architecture that AI increasingly automates.

Automating Standards and Accountability

Contemporary AI education systems largely automate the standards-based accountability reforms that came to dominate education policy from the 1990s through the early twenty-first century. The standards-and-accountability movement aligned curriculum with prescriptive learning standards, imposed performance metrics on teaching, and made standardized test scores the privileged evidence of student learning, teacher quality, and school effectiveness. Although advocates presented these reforms as instruments of transparency, equity, and academic rigor, they revived industrial efficiency models in education. They treated knowledge as discrete units that could be prescribed, transmitted, measured, and compared while reducing teachers' autonomy and limiting their capacity to act as transformative intellectuals (Au 2009; Hursh 2008; Nichols and Berliner 2007).

Standards-based accountability expanded earlier forms of Taylorism, scientific management, and positivism in schooling. It assumed that educational purposes could be established outside the pedagogical encounter, translated into standardized objectives, and measured through apparently neutral instruments. Curriculum increasingly became what tests could measure, and learning became the numerical record of student performance. Congress and the George W. Bush administration used No Child Left Behind to intensify annual testing and

attach escalating consequences to schools that failed to demonstrate adequate progress. Public officials and privatization advocates then used these designations to legitimate school closures, staff replacement, charter conversion, private contracting, and other forms of educational privatization. The Obama administration retained the central assumptions of test-based accountability while encouraging states to expand charter schooling, adopt common standards, construct longitudinal data systems, and evaluate teachers partly through student test performance (Saltman 2016).

Standards-based accountability advanced a particular ideological understanding of knowledge, curriculum, and pedagogy. It treated knowledge as neutral, objective, and detachable from the social positions, historical conflicts, and political interests involved in its production. Standards, scripts, pacing guides, assessment schedules, and data systems subordinated teachers' pedagogical authority and interpretive judgment. The problem therefore extended beyond the amount of testing or the misuse of particular assessments. Standards-based reform installed a restricted conception of education. Knowledge became something students consumed, accumulated, and exchanged for credentials rather than something they interpreted, produced, and used to understand and transform the social world.

Standards-and-accountability policies did not eliminate teacher or student agency. Teachers interpreted, modified, evaded, and resisted standardized mandates, while students refused tests, disengaged from imposed curricula, and developed ways of working around institutional demands. Through the Opt Out movement and other forms of resistance, teachers, students, parents, and communities exposed the educational damage caused by high-stakes testing, narrowed curriculum, and punitive accountability and weakened reformers' claims to legitimacy.

From Standards to Digital Platforms

Policymakers, foundations, reform organizations, and educational vendors promoted Social and Emotional Learning partly as an answer to growing opposition to an educational model organized around relentless measurement, punishment, and objectivism. SEL discourse appeared to offer a humane corrective by emphasizing emotion, relationships, student well-being, and capacities of human subjects ignored by standardized tests. SEL programs largely register subjective student emotions without providing a means of interpreting them or the objective forces and structures that produce them. What is more, SEL programs largely aim to cultivate disciplinary self-control.

In these uses, SEL discourse frequently translated structural social problems into individualized psychological challenges. Poverty became trauma. Institutional racism became stress. Precarity became a deficit in resilience. Schools and program designers encouraged students to regulate their emotions, manage adversity, develop grit, and accommodate themselves to conditions they had little power to change. Rather than helping students analyze the social causes of their experiences and develop collective capacities to transform them, these approaches defined agency as self-management and adaptation to and within existing institutions (Saltman 2014; Saltman 2023).

SEL supplemented rather than displaced standards and accountability. Schools continued to define educational success through measurable performance, but they increasingly expected students to acquire the emotional dispositions necessary to perform successfully within the same arrangements. Foundations, venture philanthropies, technology firms, and educational vendors then invested in digital platforms that promised to measure and cultivate engagement, persistence, self-regulation, motivation, and resilience deemed “non-cognitive skills.” Through

these products, digital educational privatization extended assessment beyond academic performance into behavior, emotion, and subjectivity. That is, SEL resilience programs largely became the content of digital educational privatization.

Adaptive “personalized learning” programs incorporated the assumptions of standards-based reform into software. They divided knowledge into prescribed competencies, continuously assessed students’ performance, adjusted the pace or difficulty of instruction, and recorded educational activity as data. Rather than replacing standardized accountability, these platforms made assessment increasingly continuous and incorporated it directly into pedagogy (Roberts-Mahoney, Means, and Garrison 2016; Selwyn 2019; Williamson 2017).

The rhetoric of personalization obscures what these systems personalize and what they leave standardized. Most adaptive platforms alter the sequence, pace, repetition, or difficulty of predetermined material. They do not ordinarily allow students to question why the curriculum includes particular knowledge, whose interests its categories serve, how claims to truth relate to power, or how knowledge might help people interpret and transform shared social conditions. They personalize movement through a standardized curriculum while leaving the selection, framing, and purposes of knowledge largely beyond the reach of teachers and students.

The increasing use of platforms also changes who exercises educational authority. School boards and district administrators purchase systems whose designers have already made decisions about curriculum, assessment, acceptable responses, sequences of learning, and definitions of progress. Teachers may retain room to interpret or supplement the platform, and they frequently resist or modify its prescribed uses. Yet administrators can require them to organize instructional time around vendor benchmarks, dashboards, and usage targets. Corporate

design decisions thereby enter the daily organization of classrooms while remaining largely inaccessible to public scrutiny or democratic contestation.

i-Ready (Curriculum Associates n.d.) and NWEA MAP Growth (NWEA n.d.) illustrate the merger of diagnostic testing and instruction. These systems convert student performance into standardized measures, compare students with established norms, and recommend instructional responses. The issue is not that teachers receive information about student learning. Teachers have always assessed what students understand and used that judgment to guide instruction. The issue is the transfer of interpretive authority to proprietary systems. A score that appears precise can obscure the cultural assumptions involved in defining readiness, the restricted forms of knowledge the assessment measures, and the institutional interests served by making students commensurable.

Digital education companies also accumulate extensive records of educational activity. Students and teachers generate data whenever they answer questions, revise responses, request assistance, move through lessons, receive feedback, or interact with dashboards. Firms can use these records to refine products, develop predictive tools, strengthen their position in educational markets, and deepen institutional dependence. While much of the public debate has focused on privacy, including the sale, sharing, and commercial use of identifiable student information, a deeper problem is that platform firms extract economic value through contracts, subscriptions, data accumulation, product development, market expansion, and control over educational infrastructure (Sadowski 2020; Srnicek 2017). Technology corporations are making children into uncompensated child laborers impressed into data manufacture (Saltman, 2026).

Generative AI Plugged into the Infrastructure

Generative AI expands the capacities of educational platforms, but schools and corporations are incorporating it into an infrastructure already organized around standards, continuous assessment, proprietary curriculum, and data-driven management. Large language models can generate explanations, questions, feedback, lesson plans, reading passages, images, and other curricular materials. Yet the institutional uses of these capacities remain shaped by decisions about what knowledge counts, which educational purposes matter, who exercises pedagogical authority, and which activities schools measure.

Khanmigo illustrates how generative AI becomes joined directly to the standards-and-accountability infrastructure. Khan Academy markets “Learning Paths” that use students’ NWEA MAP Growth scores to assign sequences of instructional material, and districts can purchase those paths with Khanmigo. Generative AI tutoring therefore does not operate independently of standardized assessment. MAP Growth locates students along standardized measures of performance, Learning Paths determine what they should encounter next, and Khanmigo guides them through the resulting material (Khan Academy n.d.). The conversational interface may generate different pathways through approved content, but it does not give students or teachers authority over the institutional decisions that define the boundaries of the pathway. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for students to question claims to truth or the assumptions through which knowledge has been framed.

MagicSchool AI represents a different form of integration. It presents itself as a centralized platform through which teachers and administrators can generate lesson plans, assessments, rubrics, individualized materials, student feedback, and administrative communications. Teachers facing large classes, insufficient planning time, and expanding

documentation demands may reasonably use such tools to preserve time and attention for students. Yet the appeal to efficiency can obscure both the labor teachers must perform to make generated materials responsible and the institutional consequences of making schools dependent on corporate systems.

I conducted two exploratory tests of MagicSchool designed to examine different dimensions of the platform. These tests do not constitute a systematic evaluation of every tool or output. In the first, I asked the platform to construct a middle-school social studies lesson about Guatemala during the early 1980s, including United States support for the government of Efraín Ríos Montt, the genocide of predominantly Indigenous Ixil and other Mayan people, and the political-economic interests involved. The chatbot initially produced a sanitized and historically inadequate account. I had to refine the prompt repeatedly, identify omissions, correct distortions, and supply the conceptual vocabulary necessary to explain genocide, racism, imperialism, counterinsurgency, and U.S. power. When I asked it to adapt the lesson to state restrictions on discussions of race and oppression, it removed or weakened discussion of racism and imperialism. The system translated political censorship into curricular adjustment.

The second test used a ninth-grade polynomial lesson drawn from Chicago Public Schools curriculum. Here the problem was not primarily ideological filtering but basic instructional reliability. The chatbot produced incoherent explanations, truncated responses, replaced numerical exponents with letters, and failed to provide a usable mathematical explanation. These encounters do not prove that MagicSchool always fails. The more important point is that responsible use required the very capacities the rhetoric of automation tends to obscure: substantive knowledge, interpretive judgment, political awareness, familiarity with students, and time to check and revise the output.

SchoolAI markets an enclosed environment in which teachers create student “Spaces” while a “Mission Control” dashboard classifies mastery, progress, engagement, and emotional states. A dashboard may help teachers notice patterns in a large class. Yet it also transforms student interaction into a continuous stream of information available for classification and intervention. A platform can identify patterns within the data it collects. It cannot comprehend a student apart from the categories and representations made available to it (SchoolAI n.d.).

Houston Independent School District’s use of Prof Jim, now Creatium, demonstrates district-level outsourcing of curriculum production. The company produced more than 2,200 reading passages for students in grades three through ten within a highly standardized district curriculum (Menchaca 2024). Under a state-appointed superintendent, HISD centralized curriculum and intensified standardized management while a private AI company generated curricular content for the resulting system. State authority, technocratic administration, and private platform production reinforced one another. The deeper question is who decides what knowledge students encounter, who can challenge how that knowledge has been framed, and what are the social positions and material interests, ideological commitments, values, and assumptions of the private actors generating educational materials.

These educational uses of AI differ, but they share a tendency to relocate educational authority into proprietary infrastructures. They also do not produce identical educational experiences across all schools. District resources, political conditions, teacher organization, student resistance, institutional mission, and class position shape how educators and administrators use these systems.

Class Differentiation in AI Schooling

Social and cultural reproduction theories provide an indispensable starting point for understanding these differences. Althusser, Bourdieu and Passeron, Bowles and Gintis, Anyon, and the British sociologists of education demonstrated that schools do more than transmit academic knowledge. They distribute forms of knowledge, cultural authority, practical competence, and ideological disposition in relation to the class structure and division of labor. Jean Anyon's study of class-differentiated schooling showed that working-class students were frequently taught to follow procedures established by others, affluent professional students were encouraged to develop individual creativity, and students in an "executive elite" school learned to reason, analyze, and develop rules for making decisions (Anyon 1980).

The strongest versions of reproduction theory never require the conclusion that schools mechanically produce compliant subjects or predetermined class futures. Students and teachers interpret, contest, evade, and resist the institutional arrangements they encounter. Paul Willis demonstrated that working-class resistance to school authority could express creativity and collective agency even as it helped reproduce class relations. Henry Giroux criticized reproduction theories for underestimating mediation, contradiction, and the possibility that schools could cultivate critical consciousness and transformative action (Giroux 1983; Willis 1977). Recognizing these limitations the three formations that follow are therefore ideal-typical tendencies that overlap and contain internal contradictions.

Working-Class Schooling: Technocratic Management and Contested Agency

Schools serving working-class and poor communities have long experienced the most intensive forms of external intervention, standardized control, and punitive accountability. These patterns remain profoundly racialized. State officials, district administrators, foundations, and

private vendors have disproportionately targeted schools serving Black and Latino communities for closure, charter conversion, scripted curriculum, behavioral management, test preparation, and technological remediation. Deficit discourses represent these communities through their distance from standardized norms and present technological intervention as a neutral means of overcoming presumed inadequacies (Au 2009; Benjamin 2019).

Digital platforms extend these earlier forms of control. District administrators frequently assign adaptive programs to students identified as below grade level, behind pace, at risk, or in need of intervention. The platform diagnoses a deficiency, assigns material intended to correct it, continuously measures performance, and reports the results through dashboards. What companies market as personalization often becomes an intensified form of remediation organized through standardized curricular categories.

Students encounter software as an authority that selects the question, defines the acceptable range of answers, judges the response, and determines what comes next. They cannot ordinarily ask why the program selected a particular question, what assumptions shaped it, why other concerns were excluded, how the claim acquired authority, or how the knowledge relates to broader political, economic, historical, and cultural forces. The continuous testing introduced by standards and accountability becomes pedagogy itself. The form precludes the possibility of dialogic, critical, and democratic modes of pedagogy while also framing learning as a function of knowledge transmission rather than knowledge co-creation.

The apparatus nevertheless does not eliminate working-class students' agency. Students ignore assignments, share strategies, manipulate platforms, use AI to circumvent repetitive work, and challenge the purposes of imposed technologies. Teachers supplement standardized materials, create spaces for discussion, refuse inappropriate recommendations, and use their

knowledge of students to contest platform classifications. Teachers' unions, parents, students, and community organizations can challenge procurement decisions, data practices, scripted curriculum, and the displacement of teacher labor. The distinction concerns the institutional conditions under which students and teachers exercise agency. In heavily platformized schools, resistance often begins from a defensive position: reclaiming time, judgment, dialogue, and curricular authority from systems imposed by administrators or vendors.

AI schooling also intensifies commodification in two overlapping temporal registers. Schools continue the longstanding work of preparing students for future relations to labor and authority. At the same time, corporations extract more immediate value through contracts, subscriptions, data accumulation, product development, and institutional dependence on proprietary systems. Platform schooling also prepares students for a future of algorithmically managed labor in which an opaque system continuously measures performance, defines acceptable conduct, and directs the next task. Students can and do resist these relations, just as workers resist algorithmic management. The political question is whether schools should normalize such relations or equip students to understand and transform them.

Professional-Class Schooling: Corporate Entrepreneurial Agency

Professional-class schooling organizes digital technology through a different ideological framework. Rather than positioning students primarily as objects of remediation, these institutions more often present students as future innovators, founders, creators, and self-directing participants in a technological economy. They cultivate agency, but the agency fostered takes a specifically corporate entrepreneurial form.

Alpha School offers a concentrated example. Although its tuition rivals that of elite schools, Alpha belongs within the professional-class formation because of the form of agency it

cultivates: the optimizing, self-branding entrepreneur rather than the inheritor prepared to direct institutions. The school delegates academic subjects to adaptive software for two hours each morning and devotes much of the remaining day to workshops in leadership, grit, financial literacy, entrepreneurship, public communication, technological production, and projects. The model does not seek to make students passive. It explicitly seeks to make them active, motivated, confident, and productive. Its ideological significance lies in the purposes toward which it directs these capacities. Students learn to identify opportunities, develop products, attract attention, overcome personal limitations, optimize performance, and transform interests into marketable ventures.

Corporate entrepreneurial agency represents social problems as opportunities for individual innovation for profit. The ideal actor does not ask primarily how people might organize democratically to alter the conditions producing a problem. The entrepreneur identifies an unmet need, creates a product or service, attracts users or investors, and scales the solution. Political conflict becomes design failure. Public institutions appear slow, inefficient, and resistant to disruption. Collective power gives way to leadership, innovation, motivation, and individual initiative.

The institution supplies an ideological vocabulary through which entrepreneurial action appears as the exemplary form of agency. It celebrates the founder, innovator, and disruptive leader rather than the citizen, organizer, union member, or participant in collective democratic struggle. Alpha's model is also noteworthy for what its AI and corporate trainings displace: humanities and social science curriculum that offer traditions that cultivate democratic dispositions of interpretation and judgment. That is, such entrepreneurial agency displaces modes of agency for collective self-governance.

Schooling for the Ruling Class: Interpretive Authority and Institutional Power

Schooling for the ruling class does not simply provide a more expensive version of professional-class education. Its distinctive function is to cultivate forms of judgment, authority, confidence, cultural legitimacy, and social connection associated with directing institutions and exercising power. Anyon observed this distinction in the “executive elite” school she studied. Teachers asked students to analyze problems, develop intellectual rules, explain their reasoning, and assess competing solutions. The pedagogical emphasis was not merely on producing a correct answer but on cultivating the power to define the terms of a problem and justify a decision (Anyon 1980).

Contemporary elite schools often preserve pedagogical forms associated with interpretive authority: extended discussion, substantive teacher attention, long-form reading, interpretive disagreement, oral defense of ideas, independent research, and selective rather than compulsory use of technology. Phillips Exeter Academy’s Harkness method, for example, asks students and teachers to discuss texts and problems around a common table, listen, question, interpret, revise claims, and assume responsibility for the movement of discussion (Phillips Exeter Academy n.d.).

These examples should not be idealized. Discussion-based classrooms can reproduce exclusion, cultural hierarchy, and unequal confidence. Elite schools can cultivate entitlement, protect inherited privilege, and prepare students to manage institutions in ways that preserve domination. The crucial point is that their students more often retain access to pedagogical forms that mass schooling increasingly restricts. They learn not simply to receive or display knowledge but to judge its meaning and mobilize it within institutions (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Khan 2011).

AI is in a more selective and subordinate position within this ideal type. Students may use AI to generate code, compare sources, test arguments, conduct research, or examine the limitations of automated output. Teachers retain greater authority to decide when and how it enters the classroom. Technology remains a tool students and teachers may employ and interrogate rather than an infrastructure that continuously classifies students and directs their work.

The contrast is not between technological and nontechnological schools. It concerns who exercises authority over technology and to what ends. In technocratically organized working-class schooling, administrators and vendors more often use digital products to direct students and teachers. In professional-class schooling, students use technology to develop projects, optimize performance, and cultivate entrepreneurial capacities. In schooling for the ruling class, students more fully acquire the authority to decide how technology should be used, what its outputs mean, and when its categories should be rejected.

These formations distribute neither intelligence nor inherent human capacity. Working-class students do not possess less agency than professional-class or ruling-class students. They exercise agency under institutional conditions that more often treat their judgment as a problem to be managed rather than a capacity to be cultivated. Professional-class schooling cultivates agency directly, but it defines agency through corporate entrepreneurial capacity. Schooling for the ruling class more fully cultivates interpretive authority and preparation to exercise institutional power.

The central inequality is therefore not simply unequal access to AI -- the so-called “digital divide.” It is the unequal distribution of authority over knowledge and technology. Some students encounter AI primarily as a system that measures and directs them. Others encounter it

as a resource for cultivating a corporate entrepreneurial ideal of agency. Still others learn to decide how such systems should be interpreted, governed, and deployed. The stratified apparatus thereby assigns students different relations to the future itself. Some are continuously measured and predicted; others are trained to optimize and position themselves within competitive markets; still others are prepared to decide the futures that the rest are taught to anticipate.

Toward a Radically Democratic Reclaiming of Education under Platform Capitalism

If interpretive authority and pedagogical autonomy increasingly become class-bound resources, the democratic task cannot consist simply of distributing the same AI products more widely. Equal access to corporate technology would leave intact the unequal purposes for which schools use it, the private ownership of educational infrastructure, and the class-differentiated forms of agency that schooling cultivates. Nor should the defense of democratic education become a nostalgic defense of liberal schooling before neoliberalism. Liberal public education frequently combined universal claims about citizenship and equality with authoritarian pedagogy, racial segregation, class domination, and exclusion.

The unrealized democratic promises of public education nevertheless remain politically important. Because liberal ideology represented education as a public good and a precondition for democratic self-government, students, teachers, communities, and social movements could invoke those promises in struggles over access, curriculum, segregation, language, labor, and educational authority. The answer to the post-liberal turn is not to restore the liberal-Keynesian formation as it existed. It is to radicalize the democratic claims that liberal schooling announced but never fulfilled.

A radically democratic response requires struggle in three interconnected areas: pedagogical authority, technological governance, and the decommodification of educational

infrastructure. Democratic education requires institutional conditions in which teachers and students can interpret knowledge, question its selection and framing, examine the authority behind claims to truth, and connect inquiry to collective action on public problems. Teachers do not merely deliver information that is produced and selected elsewhere. As transformative intellectuals, they connect knowledge to historical circumstances, social conflict, student experience, and possibilities for political action. Students likewise require more than the limited agency of choosing among options a platform has already defined (Freire 1970; Giroux 1983).

Public ownership and control of educational technology are necessary because private corporations determine much of the infrastructure through which schools assess students, organize curriculum, generate materials, and record educational activity. Yet public control alone does not guarantee democratic education. State agencies and district administrations have repeatedly imposed standardized curricula, punitive testing, political censorship, and authoritarian forms of management. Democratic technological governance therefore requires more than transferring ownership from a company to a state agency. Teachers, students, unions, families, and communities need meaningful power over whether schools adopt a technology, how designers construct it, which data it collects, how administrators use its classifications, and whether educators can refuse it.

Transparency is not sufficient. A corporation can disclose that a platform collects data or uses a particular scoring method without surrendering the authority to define educational purposes. Democratic governance requires the power to change or refuse the system, not simply the opportunity to understand how it operates. It also requires collective forms of expertise through which teachers, students, community organizations, technologists, and scholars can evaluate claims that companies present as matters of technical necessity.

Decommodification means treating educational infrastructure as a public capacity rather than a site for rent extraction. Schools should not have to purchase continuing access to the systems through which they conduct their most basic educational functions. Public investment should support technologies that institutions can inspect, modify, maintain, and, when necessary, abandon without losing access to curriculum, student records, or essential administrative capacities. Schools should minimize data collection, prohibit uses unrelated to clearly defined educational purposes, and prevent companies from using school-generated data for independent commercial development.

Most importantly, public institutions should invest in people rather than use AI as a substitute for them. Schools turn to automated tutoring, generated curriculum, and behavioral dashboards partly because policymakers have tolerated large classes, insufficient planning time, inadequate staffing, and the erosion of professional support. Technology companies then present products as solutions to institutional problems created through political decisions. Hiring more teachers, librarians, counselors, special educators, teaching artists, and support staff may appear less innovative than purchasing an AI platform, but such investment directly expands the social relationships through which education acquires meaning.

None of these transformations will result automatically from better policy design or more ethically responsible technology. Corporate vendors, investors, foundations, and political authorities possess material interests in expanding platform control. Teachers, students, unions, families, and communities have nevertheless demonstrated their capacity to resist arrangements presented as inevitable. Organized refusal can create the conditions for different technological possibilities by rejecting systems that subordinate teachers and students, expose communities to extraction, or foreclose democratic inquiry. Refusal need not mean rejecting all AI. It means

refusing the assumption that corporations and administrators have the right to determine how schools use it. Moreover, refusal and resistance need to be considered in relation to the radically democratic possibilities of new technology for social movements. Digital culture projects such as Forensic Architecture and Bellingcat typify the uses of AI in forms that allow individuals and groups to identify the otherwise hidden workings of corporate state power, to dissect and challenge authoritarian rule and violence and enable individuals to produce knowledge in ways that highlight power, politics, and justice. These projects can inform and inspire educators to use technology as a tool of critical and democratic educational practice.

The central struggle is not between technological progress and nostalgic resistance. It is between competing organizations of educational authority. One organizes schooling through corporate digital products, technocratic measurement, entrepreneurial individualism, and increasingly authoritarian restrictions on knowledge. The other seeks to place technology under the democratic authority of teachers, students, workers, and communities while cultivating the collective capacity to interpret and transform social life. A radically democratic education would refuse the class division of pedagogical authority. It would make interpretation, judgment, pedagogical autonomy, and the collective power to govern technology universal educational capacities rather than privileges reserved for those being prepared to rule.

References

- Alpha School. "The Program." *Alpha School*. <https://alpha.school/the-program/>.
- Alpha School. "Locations." Alpha School. <https://alpha.school/locations/>.
- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971. 127–86.
- Anyon, Jean. "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work." *Journal of Education* 162.1 (1980): 67–92.
- Au, Wayne. *Unequal by Design: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Benjamin, Ruha. *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge: Polity, 2019.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Trans. Richard Nice. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1977.
- Bowles, Samuel, and Herbert Gintis. *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. New York: Basic Books, 1976.
- Curriculum Associates. "Diagnostic Assessments for Mathematics and Reading." Curriculum Associates. <https://www.curriculumassociates.com/programs/i-ready-assessment/diagnostic>.
- . "i-Ready Learning." Curriculum Associates. <https://www.curriculumassociates.com/programs/i-ready-learning>.
- Deneen, Patrick J. *Why Liberalism Failed*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2018.
- Feathers, Todd. "Parents Fell in Love With Alpha School's Promise. Then They Wanted Out." *Wired* (27 Oct. 2025). <https://www.wired.com/story/ai-teacher-inside-alpha-school/>.

- Fraser, Nancy. *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond*. London: Verso, 2019.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970.
- Gaztambide-Fernández, Rubén A. *The Best of the Best: Becoming Elite at an American Boarding School*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.
- Giroux, Henry A. *Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition*. South Hadley: Bergin and Garvey, 1983.
- Hursh, David. *High-Stakes Testing and the Decline of Teaching and Learning: The Real Crisis in Education*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008.
- Khan, Shamus Rahman. *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011.
- Khan Academy. "Becoming a Khan Academy Districts Partner." *Khan Academy Blog*.
<https://blog.khanacademy.org/becoming-a-khan-academy-districts-partner/>.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown, 2018.
- Menchaca, Megan. "What to Know about Prof Jim Inc., the AI Company Houston ISD Is Using to Generate Reading Passages." *Houston Chronicle* (20 Dec. 2024).
<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/education/hisd/article/hisd-ai-prof-jim-inc-19958093.php>.
- Nichols, Sharon L., and David C. Berliner. *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2007.

NWEA. “MAP Growth.” NWEA. <https://www.nwea.org/map-growth/>. ———. “MAP Growth Fact Sheet.” NWEA. <https://www.nwea.org/resource-center/resource/map-growth-fact-sheet/>.

Phillips Exeter Academy. “Harkness.” *Phillips Exeter Academy*.
<https://exeter.edu/academics/harkness/>.

Roberts-Mahoney, Heather, Alexander J. Means, and Mark J. Garrison. “Netfixing Human Capital Development: Personalized Learning Technology and the Corporatization of K–12 Education.” *Journal of Education Policy* 31.4 (2016): 405–20.

Robinson, William I. *The Global Police State* London: Pluto Press, 2020.

Sadowski, Jathan. *Too Smart: How Digital Capitalism Is Extracting Data, Controlling Our Lives, and Taking Over the World*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020.

Saltman, Kenneth J. “The Austerity School: Grit, Character, and the Privatization of Education.” *symplekē* 22.1–2 (2014): 41–57.

———. *Scripted Bodies: Corporate Power, Smart Technologies, and the Undoing of Public Education*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

———. *The Alienation of Fact: AI, Digital Educational Privatization, and the False Promise of Bodies and Numbers*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022.

———. *The Disaster of Resilience: Education, Digital Privatization, and Profiteering*. London: Bloomsbury, 2023.

———. *AI Schools and the New Child Labor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026.

SchoolAI. “Your Guide to Mission Control.” *SchoolAI Help Center*.

<https://help.schoolai.com/en/articles/15243484-your-guide-to-mission-control>.

Selwyn, Neil. *Should Robots Replace Teachers? AI and the Future of Education*. Cambridge: Polity, 2019.

Srnicek, Nick. *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity, 2017.

Williamson, Ben. *Big Data in Education: The Digital Future of Learning, Policy and Practice*. London: Sage, 2017.

Willis, Paul. *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. Farnborough: Saxon House, 1977.

DRAFT