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**EDUCATION AS A FIELD OF POWER IN
CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACIES:
POLITICAL LEGITIMIZATION AND
INEQUALITY**

A Socio-Political Analysis of Right-Wing Populism in the United States

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Abstract

Education has long been presented in the United States as a space where the American Dream and democracy are built. Yet under Trumpism, these promises coexist with policies that dismantle the very mechanisms designed to make it accessible. Book bans, curriculum restrictions, the erosion of the Department of Education, private school voucher programmes, and the redefinition of institutional neutrality are not presented as attacks on education but as its defence: a protection of parental rights and a return to "true" American values. Behind this language of protection, however, inequality deepens rather than diminishes. To make sense of this contradiction, this thesis draws on classical socio-political concepts, combining sociological and political theory. Bourdieu's notions of capital, habitus and symbolic violence show education as a field where cultural and social advantages already possessed by dominant groups are legitimised as merit, while structural barriers in college admissions and student debt reproduce existing hierarchies. Laclau's theory of populism explains how terms like "freedom" or "school choice" function as empty signifiers, uniting heterogeneous grievances against a constructed enemy, the "woke elite", while absorbing democratic demands into an agenda that serves opposing interests. Foucault's framework reveals how power operates not through coercion but through norms and discourse that silence dissent while appearing self-evident. Ultimately, this thesis shows that education functions as a field of power rather than a neutral path to mobility, and that resistance persists nonetheless, in teachers, librarians and unions who defend its democratic function.

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This thesis is dedicated to all librarians who defend the right to read and the right of children to find the answers they need to understand themselves, as they know they are saving and building the present. And to all teachers who defend the right to learn and fight every day to provide their students with the best quality of education, despite the obstacles put on by their institutions and governments, as they know they are saving and building the future.

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Introduction

I remember when I first read in the news an article about the book banning in a United States' high school library. I could not believe that such list existed. When I went through it, it included books like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *A Hundred Years of Solitude* or even the *Harry Potter* saga. I could not understand what was wrong with those books and I couldn't help to think how children could not have the opportunity of reading those stories. The reality that was making its way felt like a setting of *Fahrenheit 451*, *Handmaid's Tale* or *1984*, which, ironically enough, were also banned. This scenario felt especially concerning coming from a country that presents itself as a democracy and freedom defender.

Even if I didn't know back in the day, that would be the birth of this thesis. When I was first asked to hand in a title of this paper, this article came back to my mind. I searched it up again and it was not there alone now, but the Internet was filled with similar articles: curriculum banning on Critical Race Theory, Yale's professors being fired for having different opinions to the government, Harvard's international students being threatened to stop their studies due to attending protests... The book banning was not an isolated phenomenon anymore, but it was part of a broader intervention in education developed by Donald Trump. And yet, each of these interventions was not presented as an attack on education but as its salvation: a defence of parental rights, a return to the true American values, an elimination of a national threat... The language of protection was being used to justify policies that precisely did the opposite of what they claimed.

And this is when I started realizing that it felt like education was treated and should be analysed as another field of power. But the United States (U.S.) is not the only democracy where education has become a battleground. Across the world, right-wing populist movements have identified educational institutions as targets, probably because is where the next generation's understanding of history, equality or citizenship is formed. In Hungary under Orbán, Argentina under Milei or Italy under Meloni, governments have done policies in this line.

Nonetheless, the case of the U.S. is especially remarkable due to its global influence and the speed with which changes have been introduced. And, at the same time, the country carries an internal contradiction that made especially interesting to write about. Its educational system has historically been sustained by two powerful narratives: the American Dream, which promises that education is the path to social mobility regardless of origin, and the democratic tradition, which

understands public schools as the foundation of civic life. Both narratives have always been contested but under the Trump administration that gap has been widened and evident. Policies that claim to defend the Dream actively dismantle the mechanisms designed to make it accessible. Policies that claim to protect democracy silence the perspectives and histories that democracy requires. I want to understand how a political project can speak the language of equality while deepening inequality.

Finally, I would like to highlight the significance of these topics. At the time of writing, the Trump administration remains in office developing their educational agenda. Teachers are renaming their lessons to avoid censorship. Librarians are fighting in court for the right to keep books on shelves. International students are losing their visas for participating in Palestinian protests. Universities are freezing programmes under the threat of federal cuts. This is the reality of millions of students, educators and families in the U.S. that this thesis seeks to comprehend.

1. Research objectives

The general objective of this thesis is to analyse education as a field of power in contemporary democracies. The goal is to examine how right-wing populism in the United States constructs legitimacy on already existing power relations while perpetuating and deepening inequalities.

To achieve this, the specific objectives are:

- To question if the classical link between education and democracy is as straightforward as historically defended and how the first, under neoliberalism, can negatively be affecting the latter.
- To examine how federal political actors can exercise influence over the decentralized educational system of the United States and to find the institutional mechanisms or voids through which such influence can happen.
- To analyse the evolution of policy interventions in both K-12 and Higher Education under Trumpism and the American Dream and how it indirectly and paradoxically perpetuates inequality.
- To study narratives and discourse strategies used by right-wing populist actors to legitimize educational reforms on their interests.

2. Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative, socio-political analytical approach. Theoretically, it combines sociological and political theory:

- Bourdieu's field theory and sociology of education: capital, habitus and social reproduction and language.
- Laclau's theory of populism: "the people", empty signifiers, chain of equivalences and appropriation of democratic demands.
- Foucault's conceptualization of power-knowledge, discourse and neoliberal governmentality.

The research involves analysis of primary and secondary sources, including:

- Official governmental documents: executive orders (e.g. the 1776 Commission), Department of Education reports (e.g. A Nation at Risk), and policy proposals (e.g. One Big Beautiful Bill Act).
- Court decisions (e.g. Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard, Brown v. Board of Education).
- Public political statements: speeches by Donald Trump and Secretary Betsy DeVos, as well as communication from groups like Moms for Liberty.
- National newspaper covering general news (e.g. Times) or education policy news (e.g. Education Week).
- Statistical and empirical data: Studies from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Common Application database and academic research on social mobility and student debt, among others.
- Documentaries (e.g. The Librarians).
- Academic literature review: from search engine like Google Scholar but especially from ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) as it is the primary repository for U.S. educational research.

3. Structure

The thesis is organized into three interrelated chapters that follow a top-down approach transitioning from an abstract macro-level theoretical conceptualization to the micro-level implementation of educational policies and everyday realities. The common guiding thread of the chapters takes the shape of the American Dream and democracy.

In *Chapter I: Socio-Political Analytical Tools*, the main theoretical concepts needed in order to understand the research are defined. This chapter is divided into two main sections: the sociological field with Pierre Bourdieu, drawing especial attention into the concepts of capital, social reproduction and language. The second section describes the concepts found in political theory, specifically Ernesto Laclau's conceptualization of populism and Michel Foucault's framework on power, discourse and governmentality.

Chapter II: An Overview of U.S. Education under Trumpism establishes the American ground of study. It contextualizes the relationship between education and democracy in the American tradition, examines how the decentralized system functions in relation to education and starts describing the push toward marketization and privatization under the Trump Administration.

Chapter III: Policy Interventions provides the practical side of the thesis with educational policies on K-12 and Higher Education while building on the previous chapters. Polarized phenomena such as book banning, the prohibition of Critical Race Theory or the rhetorical construction between "patriotic American families" and "woke institutional elites" are examined in this section. The chapter concludes with the sites of resistance that build the counter-discourses.

CHAPTER I: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYTICAL TOOLS

1. Theoretical foundations of classical sociology

To explain the relationship between education, power and social inequality, starting in classical sociology and, especially, on sociology of education, is the logical first step. Among the sociologists who have most influenced contemporary analysis of education are Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron. These authors argued that educational systems operate as mechanisms of social reproduction. Through concepts such as habitus, cultural capital and symbolic power, they demonstrated how schools reward the cultural dispositions of dominant social groups while presenting educational success as the result of individual merit. Educational institutions contribute, therefore, to the legitimisation of social hierarchies by transforming inherited advantages into apparently neutral academic achievements.

As Michael Grenfell notes, a Bourdieusian reminds us that: *“the very language we use to discuss research topics needs to be ‘interrogated’ in Bourdieusian terms in order to discover something of the actual dynamic of the processes they involve”*¹. It is in this way how classical sociology provides the basis for analysing education as a field of power where social inequalities are reproduced and legitimised.

1.1. Pierre Bourdieu

Even though Bourdieu never directly offered an approach to educational policy analysis in relation to schools or universities², within his framework, education policy is redefined as a field of struggle where dominant and dominated agents compete over the forms of capital (cultural, social

¹ Michael Grenfell, ‘Applying Bourdieu’s field theory: the case of social capital and education’ (2009) 3(1) *Education, Knowledge & Economy* 17, 30 <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael-Grenfell-5/publication/234635250_Applying_Bourdieu%27s_Field_Theory_The_Case_of_Social_Capital_and_Education/links/00b4953c8066c3373b000000/Applying-Bourdieu-Field-Theory-The-Case-of-Social-Capital-and-Education.pdf> accessed 12 March 2026.

² Agnès Van Zanten, ‘Bourdieu as education policy analyst and expert: a rich but ambiguous legacy’ (2005) 20 (6) *Journal of Education Policy* 671 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02680930500238887>> accessed 12 March 2026.

and symbolic) that are most highly valued³. These three types of capital shape the ways in which lower social classes are oppressed and how the upper maintains their advantages, reinforcing existing class structures⁴. Therefore, the school is not a neutral zone but an area of legitimization for the dominant group. Bourdieu becomes a relevant author as his concepts or thinking tools are adaptable and can work as a methodological base and lens for research on education policy and are useful to understand the connection between this field and other education fields and sub-fields⁵.

1.1.1. Cultural Capital and Social Capital

The term *cultural capital* was intended to account for otherwise inexplicable differences in the academic performance of children with unequal cultural patrimonies and more generally, in all kinds of cultural and economic practice⁶. Bourdieu identified three principal forms of cultural capital: an “embodied state” (form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body), an “objective state” (paintings, books, instruments) and an “institutional state” (diplomas, certificates)⁷. The term cultural capital can build bridges between different social fields like education, art, literature and economy and it can be converted into other capitals.

Despite the economic connotation and metaphor, the term “capital” implies, it does not only express what is valued and powerful, but also what is excluded and can produce distinction and hierarchies. And, as a consequence, according to Bourdieu and Passeron, schooling experiences are influenced by individuals’ possession of the different capitals and by their ability to operationalize them, ensuring those individuals with greater capital can make the system work in their advantage⁸.

³ Shaun Rawolle, Deakin University and Bob Lingard, *Education Policy and Contemporary Theory* (Routledge 2015) <<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315818429-3/bourdieu-policy-sociology-education-shaun-rawolle-bob-lingard>> accessed 13 March 2026.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The forms of capital’ in John G. Richardson (ed), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (Greenwood Press 1986).

⁵ Rawolle, *Education Policy and Contemporary Theory* (n 3).

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Social Structures of the Economy* (Polity Press 2005).

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *The inheritors: French students and their relation to culture* (University of Chicago Press 1979).

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, & Culture* (Sage Publications 1990).

But cultural capital, as well as social or economic capital, is symbolic. This symbolism is defined by Bourdieu as “*esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others*” and “*can only be perpetuated so long as it succeeds in obtaining belief in its existence*”⁹. In other words, cultural capital is socially constructed, determining what is and what is not rewarded. Although open to all, its distribution is by definition unequal, otherwise, it would not perform its functional logic of differentiation¹⁰.

Cultural capital is intertwined with *social capital* which Bourdieu defines as “*the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition*”¹¹. In the educational context, social capital represents networks and institutional connections that are used to, for example, secure enrolment in elite universities or influence educational policy. When cultural capital (knowing how to navigate the school system) is backed by social capital (having the rights connections), their conversion into economic capital is accelerated and legitimized.

As a result, when both capitals work together, they contribute to the social reproduction that will be analysed in the next section.

1.1.2. Social Reproduction: Habitus and Symbolic Violence

Education is often conceived as a pathway to socio and economic improvement and consequently, a domain capable of challenging and even reducing social inequality. Bourdieu and Passeron questioned this idea in *Les Héritiers*¹² through the concepts of capital and habitus. Children from bourgeois families, transmits not only money, but a specific habitus: a set of dispositions, tastes, ways of speaking and body postures. When the child enters school, they encounter an institution that implicitly demands and later rewards the very habitus that bourgeois families possess.

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The forms of capital’ in John G. Richardson (ed), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (Greenwood Press 1986) 166.

¹⁰ Michael Grenfell, ‘Applying Bourdieu’s field theory: the case of social capital and education’ (2009) 3(1) *Education, Knowledge & Economy* 17, 20 <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael-Grenfell-5/publication/234635250_Applying_Bourdieu%27s_Field_Theory_The_Case_of_Social_Capital_and_Education/links/00b4953c8066c3373b000000/Applying-Bourdieu's-Field-Theory-The-Case-of-Social-Capital-and-Education.pdf> accessed 12 March 2026.

¹¹ Bourdieu, ‘The forms of capital’ (n 9).

¹² Bourdieu, *The inheritors* (n 7).

Meanwhile, the working-class student, who are less likely to possess the forms of capital valued by the school, feels behind and not prepared for what is expected from him.

This process is what Bourdieu and Passaron describe as *social reproduction*: the tendency of the educational system to reproduce the existing hierarchies by rewarding the capital and habitus of dominant groups as if they were individual merit. The concept social reproduction explains how education is a “*mechanism for consolidating social separation*”¹³ rather than being a meritocratic force for equality. The authors argue that students’ academic trajectories are largely predetermined by their social origins, succeeding or failing based on the volume and composition of cultural capital inherited from their family¹⁴.

This leads to two fundamental consequences. Firstly, it contradicts the very principles of a democratic society. Education misrecognizes “talent” or “merit” with what is the inherited capital and habitus of the privileged family while the discomfort of lower-class students is perceived as, lack of interest or ability. As a result, social and academic inequalities are seen as legitimate because they are believed to be based on individual aptitude.

Secondly, this mechanism constitutes what Bourdieu and Passeron’s described in *La Reproduction* as symbolic violence, defined as the “*imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power*”¹⁵. As the dominant culture is presented as universally valuable, students who do not possess this capital perceive their educational difficulties as personal problems rather than the product of structural inequalities. In turn, working-class students internalize their failures decreasing their individual aspirations and often accepting positions to which they have been assigned like manual work.

Over time, Bourdieu’s theory has been backed up with empirical evidence. Studies based on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) exam, which measures the academic performance across countries and socio-economic backgrounds, use statistical indicators like the GINI coefficient to measure educational inequality. The results have been the same as the ones Bourdieu already claimed 50 years ago, but adding the country variable: the countries with higher economic inequality have a bigger educational inequality¹⁶.

¹³ Derek Robbins, ‘Theory of practice’ in Michael Grenfell (ed), *Pierre Bourdieu: Key concepts* (Acumen 2008) 29.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, *The inheritors* (n 7).

¹⁵ Bourdieu, *Reproduction* (n 8).

¹⁶ Francesc Jesús Hernández Dobon, ‘PISA da la razón a Bourdieu’ (2022) 15 (2) *Revista de Sociología de la Educación* 284 <<https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8453458>> accessed 16 March 2026.

Nonetheless, Bourdieu's work has received criticism. Some authors like Sullivan consider cultural capital as something particular of France context¹⁷, other authors like Jenkins¹⁸ and Swartz¹⁹ do not agree on his social reproduction theory as they consider to be too deterministic. In this latter line, Richard Harker notes that social reproduction is not as mechanical as a photocopy. Even if the educational system tends towards reproducing social inequalities, the process is not automatic and there exists a what he calls "time-lag" between structures and habitus that leads to changes in generations²⁰.

Despite opposing ideas, Bourdieu is still a useful author two decades after his death as his concepts of capital, habitus, social reproduction and symbolic power are tools for understanding the dynamics behind inequalities which are perceived as natural and even as fair.

1.1.3. Language

Bourdieu's understanding of language works as a form of symbolic power: language is not neutral, but it depends on the social position and authority of the speaker. Through what Bourdieu calls the "linguistic market", certain forms of expression, vocabularies and discourses are recognised as legitimate, while others are marginalised or devalued²¹. In this sense, language contributes to social reproduction by presenting dominant meanings as universal.

Bourdieu's work on language also draws our attention to the significance of the language of policy texts and their role in symbolic violence, especially when connected to the state's claim for the universal application of policy²². Educational policies are not merely technical instruments but also mechanisms through which a particular vision of equality or freedom become legitimised. The language used in political and educational debates shapes how social problems are understood as populist theory will later explain.

¹⁷ Alice Sullivan, 'Cultural Capital and Educational Attainment' (2001) 35 (4) *Sociology* 893
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231991091_Cultural_Capital_and_Educational_Attainment> accessed 13 March 2026.

¹⁸ Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu* (Routledge 1992).

¹⁹ David Swartz, *Culture and power: The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (The University of Chicago Press 1997).

²⁰ Richard Harker, Cheleen Mahar and Chris Wilkes, *An introduction to the work of Pierre Bourdieu: The practice of theory* (Palgrave Macmillan 1990) 103.

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Economics of Linguistic Exchanges' (1977) 16 (6) *Social Science Information*.

²² Rawolle, *Education Policy and Contemporary Theory* (n 3).

2. Theoretical contributions from political theory

While classical sociology explains the social reproduction of the educational system, to understand how the contemporary education system and institutions are transformed by populist movements, political theory is needed. To examine how educational policies can become perpetrators of power, this section introduces the theoretical framework of Ernesto Laclau and Michel Foucault. Together, these theoretical contributions establish the required tools to analyse the discursive and institutional dimensions of Trumpism's intervention in the American education.

2.1. Ernesto Laclau: Populism, definitions and key characteristics

Ernesto Laclau was a political theorist whose work fundamentally reconceptualised the study of populism, ideology and political identity. Laclau developed a post-structuralist theory of political discourse that placed the construction of collective identities at the centre of political analysis. His most systematic statement of this theory is *On Populist Reason* (2005), written in collaboration with Chantal Mouffe on the broader project of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), and it is in these works that the conceptual tools most relevant to this thesis are developed.

2.1.1. The Construction of “the People” and the Enemy

Laclau's theoretical move is to refuse the common-sense treatment of populism as a specific content (a set of ideas, policies or rhetorical styles) and to reconceptualise it instead as a *political logic*: a particular mode of constructing political identities and articulating political demands. In *On Populist Reason* (2005), Laclau argues that populism emerges when a plurality of heterogeneous social demands, from different sectors of society that address different grievances, and have no inherent connection with one another, fail to be satisfied by the existing institutional order and begin to be articulated together into a unified political identity. This process of

articulation produces the political category of "the people": a collective subject constructed through the very act of political discourse²³.

This political identity means that "the people" is never simply there, waiting to be represented, but it must be produced through discourse. And it means that the unity of "the people" is always a precarious, contingent achievement: different actors can articulate the same social demands into very different political identities depending on which antagonisms they construct, and which equivalences they establish. Once "the people" is described, it needs an antagonist. In the book, Laclau divides the social field between "the people" and "the elite" who varies historically but the logic remains constant: the people is defined as authentic, cheated and disposed while the elite is defined as corrupt and oppressive²⁴.

In the educational field, it will be described in Chapter III how Trump builds this antagonism by "the people" as patriotic American families and "the other" takes the shape of educational administrators, universities, public school librarians who impose their ideological agenda on defenceless children while being funded by taxpayers.

2.1.2. Logic of Equivalence and Empty Signifiers

Whereas institutionalized politics follow a *logic of difference*, where each demand is treated separately and satisfied through specific policy measures, Laclau argues that populist politics are characterised by the *logic of equivalence*. This logic does not emerge from the existence of shared interests but from the articulation of different social demands into a common political project. In this process, demands that were originally unrelated come to be understood together as equivalent as they are directed against the same antagonist. In other words, particular demands are not satisfied individually but transformed into equivalent expressions of a more general grievance²⁵.

Once this chain of equivalence has been established, it can be symbolically represented by what Laclau calls an *empty signifier*. In any political discourse, certain terms or symbols come to occupy a special position. But in the case of populism, these terms are progressively emptied of their specific meaning and filled instead with the function of representing the unity of a common

²³ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso 2005).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

cause. An empty signifier is a term that has been generalised to the point where it can condense and represent an entire chain of demands and it does this not because it has a content that genuinely captures all of them, but because it functions as the symbol of their equivalence against a common enemy²⁶.

In the U.S. educational context, the logic of equivalence can be observed in the way diverse grievances (opposition to COVID masks, discomfort with LGBTQ+ curricula, resentment of diversity programmes) are no longer treated as separate issues but as equivalent expressions of a broader conflict. The equivalence is established through a common antagonist: a “woke” educational establishment that is portrayed as threatening the values of American families. Within this chain of equivalence, terms such as “freedom” or “indoctrination” function as empty signifiers. Rather than possessing a fixed meaning, they condense these heterogeneous demands into a unified political identity precisely because their content remains indeterminate enough to accommodate different grievances.

2.1.3. The Populist Appropriation of Democratic Demands

Laclau argues that the demands through which populism constructs its chain of equivalences are not necessarily anti-democratic in their origin, as they may be linked to inequality or exclusion. What makes them populist is not their content but their articulation. The rearticulation absorbs the democratic demand, and it is transformed into a political project that does not actually address it and might not even serve different objective but even opposing interests²⁷. This rearticulation will be found in some educational interventions analysed in this thesis.

2.2. Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault was one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, whose work includes philosophy, history, sociology and political theory. His analytical framework does not constitute a unified theory in the conventional sense but rather a set of tools for examining how

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

power operates in modern societies through the production of knowledge, norms and subjectivities. Three of his conceptual contributions are central to this thesis: the relationship between power and knowledge, the concept of governmentality and the productive function of discourse.

2.2.1. Power: Power-Knowledge and the Productive Function of Power

Foucault's conception of power does not locate the power exclusively within state institutions or sovereign authority. In its place, Foucault proposes a micro-physics of power, characterizing it not as a commodity to be possessed but as a strategic network of relations in constant tension and activity. Within this framework, and in the educational system context, Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) the concept of *pouvoir-savoir* (power-knowledge). Power-knowledge describes that the exercise of power and the constitution of fields of knowledge are mutually reinforcing: "*there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations*"²⁸.

This means that knowledge is never neutral. What counts as legitimate knowledge, what is recognised as true or objective, is always the product of power relations that determine who has the authority to speak and what can be said. The criteria of validity themselves are a field of political dispute rather than a neutral ground above politics. This insight will later be used in this thesis when it is needed to choose the educational curriculum, the standards by which student achievement is measured, the definition of what constitutes legitimate academic knowledge, and the discourse around what is "objective" or "neutral" in teaching. The decisions taken are then not self-evident truths but the products of relations of power that can be traced.

Foucault also insists on the productive function of power. Against what he calls the "repressive hypothesis", which is the assumption that power operates primarily by saying no, prohibiting, suppressing and silencing, Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) that modern power

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (A. Sheridan trans, Penguin 1991).

is above all productive: it produces subjects, produces knowledge, produces desires, and produces the very categories through which we understand ourselves and our social world²⁹.

Understanding this productive dimension is what allows us to see education not merely as a site of political contestation but, as this thesis argues, as a *field of power* in the Foucauldian sense: a terrain where relations of power are produced and reproduced. But, as he stated, where there is power, there is resistance³⁰ and those relations of power will be indeed responded.

2.2.2. Neoliberal Governmentality

In the context of contemporary rationality, Foucault identifies the emergence of *neoliberal governmentality*³¹. He argues that modern power operates not primarily through juridical prohibition (the law that says “you must not”) but through the production of norms and systems of evaluation that regulate conduct by making subjects govern themselves. Under this regime, the subject is reconfigured as an entrepreneur of himself, acting as his own capital and source of earnings³². This is what Foucault calls *normalisation*: power that operates by defining what is normal or successful and then evaluating individuals in relation to that norm³³.

This form of neoliberal governmentality is foundational to the theory of human capital, within which education is redefined as a strategic investment in an “abilities-machine” intended to generate a future income. Within this framework, responsibility for educational success is shifted from the state to the individual who has to manage their own life trajectory and educational choices according to market logic³⁴. As a result, freedom is not anymore provided by public institutions but is the individual’s capacity to make choices in accordance with market principles.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (Éditions Gallimard 1976).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979* (M. Senellart ed, G.Burchell trans, Palgrave Macmillan 2008).

³² Ibid.

³³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (n 28).

³⁴ Michael Ian Cohen, ‘Education Populism? A Corpus-Driven Analysis of Betsy DeVos’s Education Policy Discourse’ (2021) 29 (16) *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 1, 21

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349321584_Education_populism_A_corpus-driven_analysis_of_Betsy_DeVos's_education_policy_discourse#fullTextFileContent> accessed 4 June 2026.

2.2.3. Discourse and the Production of Truth

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *The Order of Discourse* (1970), Foucault argues that truth is not an abstract universal or a simple representation of reality, but it is produced through systems of power and productive forces. In this way, discourses produce effects of truth making claims that appear self-evident and natural while stating other claims to be illegitimate. The claim to neutrality is itself a discursive operation and, as Foucault would argue, the most powerful discourses are those that successfully present themselves as not being discourses at all. This process of creating truth through the discourse is what Foucault calls the *régime de vérité* (regime of truth) which operates through the internalisation of norms by dominant discourses. This Foucauldian perspective will be used to examine how the educational discourse is built under Trumpism.

CHAPTER II: AN OVERVIEW OF U.S. EDUCATION UNDER TRUMPISM

1. Education and Democracy

As scholars Hochschild and Scovronick describe, and also supported Suspitsyna's analysis on the U.S. Department of Education speeches³⁵, the United States public education has historically had two big objectives. Firstly, education plays a key role in the light of the American Dream. This dream is the promise that all Americans have a chance to achieve success and fulfilment through their own efforts and resources, regardless of their circumstances at birth. The Dream is ubiquitously recognized. Equality of opportunity to become legitimately unequal is an essential part, though not the whole, of the American Dream³⁶. In education, this would seem to mandate that all students have equal chances at similar-quality education.

Secondly, there is a collective goal: the commitment to democracy. The authors understand by democracy a system of governance where the political authority is exercised by representatives elected through regular and fair elections where all adult citizens are entitled to participate. Consequently, public-school classrooms are training grounds for liberal democracy³⁷ where a culture of democracy can be taught. Philosopher John Dewey argued in his book *Democracy and Education*, “democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife”³⁸. The United States Supreme Court in the case *Abington School District v. Schempp* shared this view, stating that “Americans regard the public schools as the most vital civic institution for the preservation of a democratic system of government” and that “a system of free public education

³⁵ Tatiana Suspitsyna, ‘Higher Education for Economic Advancement and Engaged Citizenship: An Analysis of the U.S. Department of Education Discourse’ (2012) 83(1) *The Journal of Higher Education* 49, 55 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236809703_Higher_Education_for_Economic_Advancement_and_Engaged_Citizenship_An_Analysis_of_the_US_Department_of_Education_Discourse#fullTextFileContent> accessed 5 May 2026.

³⁶ Jennifer L. Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick, ‘Democratic Education and the American Dream’ in Lorraine McDonnell, P Michael Timpane and Roger Benjamin (eds), *Rediscovering the Democratic Purposes of Education* (University of Kansas 2000) 209 <<https://jlhochschild.scholars.harvard.edu/publications/democratic-education-and-american-dream?utm>> accessed 24 April 2026.

³⁷ Benjamin Justice and Jason Stanley, ‘Teaching in the Time of Trump’ (2016) 80(1) *Social Education* 36, 40 <https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/publications/articles/se_80011636.pdf> accessed 6 May 2026.

³⁸ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Macmillan 1916).

forfeits its unique contribution to the growth of democratic citizenship”³⁹. And Justice Stephen Breyer of the Supreme Court in *Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.* defended that “America’s public schools are nurseries of democracy”⁴⁰.

Teaching democracy means teaching students the bounds of reasonableness of public issues and speech as well as training them to detect the accuracy of statements⁴¹. But as Foucault argued, there is no knowledge independent from power⁴² and democratic principles and ideals are not themselves neutral⁴³, though this does not mean the same as giving free rein to all perspectives⁴⁴ but rather acknowledging that the criteria of validity themselves are a field of political debate. The criteria through which students learn how to critique and evaluate knowledge, and on how conceptions of democratic legitimacy are themselves shaped by power. The same applies to other features of school content: what disciplines prevail and what is included or excluded from the curriculum. This relationship between power and knowledge becomes evident in the U.S. under Trump, where what is taught in schools can be redefined by economic power which operates through the logic of neoliberalism.

Even if higher education can serve both the market and democracy, in the neoliberal discourse they end up meaning the same: the social function (equality, preparation for citizenship) is redefined as economic goals (national competitiveness, market participation)⁴⁵. And in this line, youth are now mostly defined as a consumer market, a drain on the economy or a stand for trouble⁴⁶. This transformation (expanded in the following chapter) regarding how higher education has become a market-driven industry instead of a social institution has marginalized the formation of democratic citizens that can be taught on college campuses⁴⁷.

Deepening this critique, Henry Giroux argues that the American “disimagination machine”, shaped through neoliberal ideology, corporate media, and consumer culture, weakens critical thinking and civic education. In this framework, the redefinition of higher education as a

³⁹ *Abington School District v Schempp*, 374 US 203 <<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/374/203/>> accessed 2 May 2026.

⁴⁰ *Mahanoy Area School District v BL*, 594 US 180, 192 (2021) <<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/594/20-255/>> accessed 22 June 2026.

⁴¹ Justice, ‘Teaching in the Time of Trump’ (n 37) 40.

⁴² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (n 33).

⁴³ Justice, ‘Teaching in the Time of Trump’ (n 37) 40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Suspitsyna, ‘Higher Education for Economic Advancement and Engaged Citizenship’ (n 35) 67.

⁴⁶ Henry A. Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society* (Routledge, 2009).

⁴⁷ Suspitsyna, ‘Higher Education for Economic Advancement and Engaged Citizenship’ (n 35) 64.

mechanism of the workforce rather than as a public institution is not a coincidence but a consequence of deliberate erosion of its civic and democratic mission⁴⁸. The result is that even if students develop civic capabilities, the political system is in favour of market interests limiting its capacity to advance any public good that conflicts with the needs of the market⁴⁹⁵⁰ and making universities starved of political imagination⁵¹.

Moreover, educational policy documents reflect this situation on the real content of the official discourse. The U.S. defends the democratic responsibility of education, yet these official documents usually exclude the school's obligation to prepare democratic citizens, focussing on communication and calculation skills in relation to sciences and technology⁵². Even if up until the 60s, American high schools required three courses in government and civics⁵³, the preparation for citizenship has been relegated to the humanities⁵⁴, resulting in democratic skills becoming a specialisation rather than a function of education. And so, the language of civic responsibility can be preserved in speech while the content is being replaced by neoliberal priorities.

To avoid this, the UN World Programme for Human Rights Education has drafted the Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training with its directives, instructing governments on how to provide and institutionalize human rights education nationally. This UN decision has led to the implementation of courses. In the case of the U.S., the purpose of the course was precisely based on the previous idea that the future of democracy, human rights and crises intervention rests heavily with the students of today⁵⁵. Despite its member state status and agreement on paper, studies have documented a lack of implementation suggesting that the democratic function of education⁵⁶, even if affirmed in the discourse, is structurally deprioritised.

⁴⁸ Henry A. Giroux, *The Violence of Organized Forgetting: Thinking Beyond America's Disimagination Machine* (City Lights Books 2014).

⁴⁹ Jamie-Lynn Magnusson, 'Examining higher education and citizenship in a global context of neoliberal restructuring' (2000) 32 *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 72

<<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/encounters/article/view/1764>> accessed 5 May 2026

⁵⁰ Jacob Torfing, 'New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe, and Zizek' (Blackwell 1999).

⁵¹ Suspitsyna, 'Higher Education for Economic Advancement and Engaged Citizenship' (n 35) 67.

⁵² Richard Neumann, 'American Democracy in Distress: The Failure of Social Education' (2017) 16 *Journal of Social Science Education* 5, 9 <<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1139461.pdf>> accessed 25 April 2026.

⁵³ 'Teach Civics: "Schools should be incubators for democracy"' (2024) *Preserving Democracy* <<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/preserving-democracy/video/teach-civics-schools-should-be-incubators-for-democracy/>> accessed 22 June 2026.

⁵⁴ George Fallis, *Multiversities, Ideas and Democracy* (University of Toronto Press 2007).

⁵⁵ Mischa Geracoulis, 'Making Curricular Space for Critical Media Literacy and Human Rights Education in the United States' (2024) 8 *International Journal of Human Rights Education* 1, 12

<<https://eric.ed.gov/?q=democracy+united+states&ft=on&id=EJ1446867>> accessed 27 April 2026.

⁵⁶ Ibid 1.

At the same time, this is reflected in trends of decreasing political interest and engagement in younger generations, like millennials. Indeed, 71% of Americans aged 18-29 describe themselves as not “politically engaged” or not “politically active”⁵⁷ which sets again the doubt of whether the education system is effectively fulfilling the democratic function it claims to have.

However, attributing the survival of democracy mainly to educational failure is debatable. The assumption is problematic due to its elitism as it simplifies political action to knowledge and information when it is often found in affects, irrationality and irresponsibility⁵⁸. Furthermore, as shown econometrically by Daron Acemoglu and co-authors, even if there is a high correlation (no causality) between schooling and democracy, countries that become more educated show no greater tendency to become more democratic, a reasoning they attribute to omitted historical and institutional factors⁵⁹.

The broader erosion of democracy in the United States since 2016 shown through institutions such as Freedom House, Varieties of Democracy, and the Economist Intelligence Unit⁶⁰ cannot be reduced to educational factors alone but political discourse continues to frame it in these terms. This dynamic is further explained by what Kraus terms the “fantasy economy”: the deliberate corporate and political construction of a narrative in which the education system is portrayed as a failure due to the inadequate workforce for the demands of a supposedly high-skill and knowledge-based economy⁶¹. The data shows, however, that the economy does not exist in the terms in which it is presented. The Bureau of Labor Statistics states that around 60% of jobs in the U.S. do not require more than a high school diploma⁶² and that educational requirements have changed very little over the past several decades⁶³. The American workforce is more educated today than at any point in history, but this myth of a failing education system redirects public

⁵⁷Institute of Politics, *Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes towards Public Service*, 29th edn (18 March–3 April 2016) (Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government 2016).

⁵⁸Michael Walzer, ‘Passion and politics’ 28 *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 617 <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/019145370202800602>> accessed 27 April 2026.

⁵⁹Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, James A. Robinson and Pierre Yared, ‘From Education to Democracy?’ (2005) 95 *American Economic Review* 44 <<https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/000282805774669916>> accessed 27 April 2026.

⁶⁰Jonathan Schulman and Richard Wike, ‘Multiple indicators show a decline in the health of America’s democracy in 2025’ (15 April 2026) *Pew Research Center* <<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/04/15/multiple-indicators-show-a-decline-in-the-health-of-americas-democracy-in-2025/>> accessed 27 April 2026.

⁶¹Neil Kraus, ‘Neoliberalism, Inequality, and Reclaiming Education for Democracy’ (2025) 49 *American Educator* 30, 35 <<https://eric.ed.gov/?q=democracy&ft=on&id=EJ1485719>> accessed 28 April 2026.

⁶²US Bureau of Labor Statistics, ‘Employment Projections: Table 5.2 Employment, Wages, and Projected Change in Employment by Typical Entry-Level Education’ <<https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/education-summary.htm>> accessed 27 April 2026.

⁶³Kraus, ‘Neoliberalism, Inequality, and Reclaiming Education for Democracy’ (n 61) 32.

attention from the corporate and political decisions responsible for producing inequality and places it into the school system.

This narrative takes up a major role in the context of Donald Trump's United States. Placing responsibility and guilt on schools becomes a way of avoiding confrontation with the root of the political problems caused by polarization⁶⁴ or explaining other causes of inequality found within the societal context⁶⁵ or the family background as concluded in the Coleman Report⁶⁶. And thus, if the problem is framed as one of education failure, it justifies the reform of the education system, making it a field of political intervention⁶⁷.

The educational agenda that we will analyse in the following chapters ranging from the privatization of education to curriculum restrictions cannot be understood in isolation from this broader political logic. Trump's interventions did not emerge from a concern for educational quality but from a deliberate strategy of using education as a field of political legitimization justifying these actions under credible economic terms.

2. Federalism and Decentralisation

The U.S. education system is characterized by its federalism and decentralisation. According to the U.S. Tenth Amendment, everything that is not explicitly attributed as a federal statal responsibility, corresponds to the states, like education. Historically, this decentralized system has produced segregation and systematic inequalities but with the growing elite concerns around educational equity and economic and military competitiveness in the context of the Cold War, the federal role was expanded⁶⁸.

⁶⁴ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, 'The Crisis of American Democracy' (2020) 44 (3) *American Educator* 6 <<https://eric.ed.gov/?q=democracy+united+states&ft=on&pg=2&id=EJ1272137>> accessed 27 April 2026.

⁶⁵ College Entrance Examination Board, *On Further Examination: Report of the Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline* (College Entrance Exam Board 1977) 47.

⁶⁶ Jal Mehta, 'Escaping the Shadow: "A Nation at Risk" and Its Far-Reaching Influence' (2015) 39 *American Educator* 20, 25 <<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1064157>> accessed 11 May 2026.

⁶⁷ Isabel Menezes, 'Commentary: The Failure of Social Education or Just Going down the Road of Post-Democratic Politics' (2017) 16 *Journal of Social Science Education* 17, 19 <<https://eric.ed.gov/?q=democracy+united+states&ft=on&id=EJ1139457>> accessed 27 April 2026.

⁶⁸ Patrick McGuinn, 'Schooling the State: ESEA and the Evolution of the U.S. Department of Education' (2015) 1 *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 77, 80 <<https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/1/3/77>> accessed 1 May 2026.

This extension took the shape of the National Defence Education Act (NDEA) and Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) through the Federal Department of Education (1979). This latter set the minimum conditions on inclusivity and non-discrimination which were needed for schools to get public federal funding. In the next section we will expand on this Department. But despite the expansion of the federal role over the last half century, the American system remains fundamentally organised around the state and local control⁶⁹.

American families generally favour on keeping the control of education on states. As there is a temptation of every new central administration to change the education agenda, Americans prefer to rely on the local who know best the reality and conditions of the territory which leads to the existence of thousands of school districts and a strong private education. This wish for greater control over decisions about their children's education is also highlighted by the persistent calls for school voucher programmes, charter schools, tax credit programmes as well as homeschooling⁷⁰.

This tension between federal oversight and state autonomy becomes evident under the Trump Administration, which systematically is using the federal architecture to its advantage. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides an example of how this federal architecture works and how it can be politically used in the practice. The ESSA replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) as states had complained about the overreach that the federal government was having on education. The ESSA defended the role of the states on the content standards should be taught, how and when success in learning these standards will be evaluated and what interventions would happen if students didn't meet the standards⁷¹.

However, it didn't eliminate completely the power of the federal government as there were still limits on education law and policy⁷². Trump used this tension between federal oversight and state autonomy to fulfil his objective of withdrawing federal government's role as guarantor of

⁶⁹ Kimberly Jenkins Robinson, 'The High Cost of Education Federalism' (2013) 48 *Wake Forest Law Review* 287 <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2259631> accessed 30 April 2026.

⁷⁰ Michael Heise, 'From No Child Left Behind to Every Student Succeeds: Back to a Future for Education Federalism' (2017) 117 *Columbia Law Review* <<https://columbialawreview.org/content/from-no-child-left-behind-to-every-student-succeeds-back-to-a-future-for-education-federalism/>> accessed 30 April 2026.

⁷¹ Every Student Succeeds Act, Pub L No 114-95, 129 Stat 1802 (2015) (codified as amended in scattered sections of 20 USC). For an argument that the Every Student Succeeds Act electively abandons the federal role in education, see Derek W Black, 'Abandoning the Federal Role in Education: The Every Student Succeeds Act' (2017) 105 *Cal L Rev* 1309, 1340–1361.

⁷² Kimberly Jenkins Robinson, 'Education Federalism: Why It Matters and How the United States Should Restructure It' (2020) *The Oxford Handbook of U.S. Education Law* 115, 116 <<https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/38565/chapter/334364878>> accessed 30 April 2026.

educational standards for vulnerable students. Under the statement of giving the power to the states and families, all fifty state plans were approved by Secretary of Education DeVos with minimal conditions, even if some failed to comply with the legal requirements⁷³.

3. The U.S. Department of Education and Private Education

3.1. History of the U.S. Department of Education and Changes in Trump's First Presidency

Although the Department of Education was established in 1867 with the goal of collecting information and statistics about the nation's schools, concern over federal overreach led to limiting the Department to an Office of Education⁷⁴. The Department of Education, in the modern version known today, was started under President Carter in 1979 accomplishing an earlier campaign promise he had made to secure the first presidential endorsement from the National Education Association (NEA)⁷⁵. With the Congress passing the Department of Education Act, the objective was to guarantee equal access to quality education as part of the broader promise of the American Dream. This meant that civil rights would be enforced, also for students living in poverty or schools with insufficient local tax base.

But after Carter, his Republican successor Ronald Reagan stated his intention of eliminating the Department, but not necessarily of eliminating state power as it will be described. He didn't have enough votes for a law, and a new strategy was needed. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, funded by the Department itself, printed a slim booklet entitled *A Nation at Risk* with the subtitle "The Imperative for Educational Reform" warning about the "*rising tide of mediocrity*". As Foucault would argue, it also created a new norm of measuring success framing education as a matter of national economic competitiveness and how, as a consequence, there was

⁷³ Bellwether Education Partners, *An independent review of ESSA plans* (2017)

<<https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/independent-review-essa-state-plans>> accessed 29 April 2026.

⁷⁴ US Department of Education, Overview of the US Department of Education: History and Purpose (2021)

<<https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-overview/overview-of-us-department-of-education-history-and-purpose>> accessed 11 May 2026.

⁷⁵ McGuinn, 'Schooling the State' (n 68) 83.

a comparative weakness of American schools internationally⁷⁶. Through an indirect coercion of standards, the political debate shifted the educational purpose, which at times had emphasize equity purpose and at others social citizenship, with a concentrated attention on the economic functions of it⁷⁷.

This document got an immense public attention leading to debates around the direction of the secondary education in the United States and the crisis of the system, contributing to the political construction of education as a field that required reform. However, the report was a source of criticism among professional researchers and academics claiming its suspension of usual standards of scientific scrutiny⁷⁸ and portraying a “fantasy economy”⁷⁹ narrative linking educational success and national competitiveness to make its provocative claims.

But what is relevant for U.S. Department of Education history is that the document did not lead to a transition from less federal intervention to decentralization, as we would expect from a Republican, but a change in the way the federal control over education functioned. While federalism was rhetorically rejected, a *Nation at Risk* legitimized indirect forms of governance through standards and accountability measures as it was portrayed as a national crisis⁸⁰.

This new paradigm gave state legislators a more active intervention in education policy while setting a common agenda that would enable the federal government to extend its reach through the coordination of those state reforms⁸¹. As Foucault argues when explaining governmentality, modern forms of power do not only function through prohibition but by producing new standards and systems of evaluation⁸². This context enabled Reagan to get enough support for succeeding in passing the Education and Consolidation and Improvement Act, which significantly cut the size and power of the Department⁸³.

⁷⁶ Jal Mehta, ‘Escaping the Shadow: “A Nation at Risk” and Its Far-Reaching Influence’ (2015) 39 *American Educator* 20, 20 <<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1064157>> accessed 11 May 2026.

⁷⁷ Ibid 23.

⁷⁸ Ibid 22.

⁷⁹ Kraus, ‘Neoliberalism, Inequality, and Reclaiming Education for Democracy’ (n 61) 35.

⁸⁰ Milton Goldberg and James Harvey, ‘A Nation at Risk: The Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education’ (1983) 1 *The Phi Delta Kappan* 14 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20386898?casa_token=oKGits6b8mEAAAAA%3Ax65W_L7h0TWpBoifNDo2vC1tGV2l3z7K7gdiJQtqFJ7TQk8ficAXKGWfVsWlYx8dVK6QKXnTTa1zn_Kcn9zTHySEsdsITAb3ECII8Z4u_IRPRnKKZY88&seq=1> accessed 11 May 2026.

⁸¹ Jal Mehta, ‘How Paradigms Create Politics: The Transformation of American Educational Policy, 1980-2001’ (2013) 50 *American Educational Research Journal* 285, 314 <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/0002831212471417>> accessed 12 May 2026.

⁸² Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (n 31).

⁸³ McGuinn, ‘Schooling the State’ (n 68) 84.

From the 1980s, economic framing consolidated a bipartisan consensus but from different reasons. Democrats found that portraying improvement in education as human capital investment meant a credible justification to defend greater public spending on schools⁸⁴, while Republicans used the same framework to advance market-based reforms and erode the traditional Democratic advantage of education⁸⁵. This consensus on the economic value of learning and the top-down reform displaced equity and civic, democratic goals from the centre of educational politics.

For example, during the Obama Administration, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) within the Education Department, in charge of protecting students against discrimination, expanded its oversight role to actively monitor compliance with the Title IX on gender discrimination as well as protecting the rights of LGBTQ students and the needs of students with disabilities⁸⁶. Some of Obama's concrete proposals, particularly his reforms to the student loan system, represented a meaningful departure from his predecessor's policies. Yet, as explained, none of these reforms can occur with disregard to the now nation's neoliberal economic setting. Obama's rhetoric did not, and structurally could not, challenge the market logic that had come to define the purpose of higher education⁸⁷.

Once Trump began his first presidency, Betsy DeVos was appointed as the U.S. Secretary of Education. As Reagan had defended before, the main commitment was to school choice to which he made his first promise of pledging \$20 billion in federal funding⁸⁸. In 2019, the Fiscal Year budget proposal was an 11 percent of reduction in the Department which meant a decrease from Obama's \$73.8 billion to \$65.8 billion. However, neither the Congress, nor the marches in different cities in defence of public education in July 2019, support Trump's budgetary retrenchment⁸⁹. The federal system limited Trump's power and he was then "forced" to use administrative action as an indirect path.

⁸⁴ Robert B. Reich, *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st-Century Capitalism* (Knopf, 1991).

⁸⁵ Frederick M. Hess and Andrew Kelly, 'Education and the 2004 Presidential Contest' (2004) *Politics of Education Association Bulletin* 1.

⁸⁶ Kenneth K. Wong, 'Education Policy Trump Style: The Administrative Presidency and Deference to States in ESSA Implementation' (2020) 50 *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 423, 427 <<https://academic.oup.com/publius/article/50/3/423/5864200>> accessed 29 April 2026.

⁸⁷ Suspitsyna, 'Higher Education for Economic Advancement and Engaged Citizenship' (n 35) 67.

⁸⁸ Kenneth K. Wong, 'Redefining the federal role in public education: the 1st quarter of the Trump "insurgent" presidency' (2017) Brookings Institution <<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/redefining-the-federal-role-in-public-education-the-1st-quarter-of-the-trump-insurgent-presidency/>> accessed 12 May 2026.

⁸⁹ Wong, 'Education Policy Trump Style' (n 89) 425.

Another example during this first presidency was that the OCR changed the system of work. With Obama, they were instructed to identify structural patterns of discrimination beyond the individual complaints, but Trump's OCR retreated to a case-by-case approach analysing only the complaint⁹⁰. Moreover, under Obama, federal guidelines explicitly warned schools that racial disparities in student discipline would be considered a violation of federal law⁹¹. With Trump, this was withdrawn under the justification that educational policy was a state and local responsibility⁹².

Beyond the budgetary retrenchment and the rollback of civil rights enforcement already explained, the first quarter of Trump's presidency included proposals to ease the entry of for-profit providers into K-12 education, a reduction of federal investment in educational data and research infrastructure, and a limit in the scope of Title IX enforcement⁹³. These policies led to a deliberate repurposing of the Department as an instrument towards market expansion. However, as Wong notes and as seen on the intent of budget cutting, the federal system constrained Trump's ambitions due to the separation of powers and the Congress resistance⁹⁴.

3.2. Recent Trends on the U.S. Department of Education under Trump's Second Presidency

During Trump's second presidency, the objective of a major reduction and reform on education has remained central. The objective has been defended through an executive order issued on March 20, 2025. In line with the conservative argument of reducing the federal involvement, the order described the will of shutting down the Department of Education under the words of *"break up the federal education bureaucracy and return education to the states"*⁹⁵, despite states and local communities having always held the primary authority over education.

⁹⁰ Ibid 428.

⁹¹ Laura Mechler, 'Trump Administration Revokes Effort to Reduce Racial Bias in School Discipline' *The Washington Post* (2018) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/trump-administration-revokes-effort-to-reduce-racial-bias-in-school-discipline/2018/12/21/3f67312a-055e-11e9-9122-82e98f91ee6f_story.html> accessed 29 April 2026.

⁹² Wong, 'Education Policy Trump Style' (n 89) 429.

⁹³ Wong, 'Redefining the federal role in public education' (n 88).

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ US Department of Education, 'U.S. Department of Education Announces Six New Agency Partnerships to Break Up Federal Bureaucracy' (2017) <<https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-announces-six-new-agency-partnerships-break-federal-bureaucracy>> accessed 14 May 2026.

Simultaneously, the order describes the will of preserving the Secretary of Education's power to withdraw federal funding for specific educational activities. The federal administration would still retain power, creating a new mechanism of governance, to defend Trump's agenda on weakening civil rights law and eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion in public schools⁹⁶. However, this decision still required the approval in the form of an act of Congress.

Even if the Administration cannot legally shut down the Department, the power is not entirely limited. Some of the positions of the Department are politically appointed and so the President and Education Secretary have margin when hiring and firing some positions or by leaving vacancies unfilled⁹⁷. The head of Education, entrepreneur Linda McMahon, has exploited these legal grey areas firing nearly half of the department's staff as people from the Department are "*radicals, zealots, and Marxists*" who "*should be fired and escorted from the building*" as President Trump's campaign materials describe⁹⁸. At the same time, she is moving the management of major programs to other federal agencies, the so-called interagency agreements (IAAs)⁹⁹, and cancelling \$900 million in contracts to key programs¹⁰⁰.

And the OCR, strong during President Joe Biden, has been the office hit hardest. In March 2025, half of its staff was put on administrative leave as "*Trump's administration prefers to keep the professionals on paid leave rather than letting them do their jobs while students, schools and families paid the price*"¹⁰¹. Seven of the 12 regional offices were shuttered. Also, the OCR has received more than 9,000 complaints between March and September 2025 and has resolved a total of 7,072 complaints as they dismissed 90% of them¹⁰². And lastly, even if traditionally the office has been reluctant to withhold federal funding from education institutions over civil rights

⁹⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center, 'Trump's Executive Order Dismantling The Department of Education, Explained' <<https://www.splcenter.org/resources/guides/trumps-doe-order-faq/>> accessed 14 May 2026.

⁹⁷ Mark Lieberman and Brooke Schultz, 'Can Trump Do That? Which Actions on Education Are Legal, and Which Ones Aren't' *Education Week* (11 March 2025) <<https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/can-trump-do-that-which-actions-on-education-are-legal-and-which-ones-arent/2025/03>> accessed 13 May 2026.

⁹⁸ Lauren Bauer and others, 'Brookings scholar's reflections on the US Department of Education' (2025) Brookings Institution <<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/brookings-scholars-reflections-on-the-us-department-of-education/>> accessed 14 May 2026.

⁹⁹ US Department of Education, 'U.S. Department of Education Announces Six New Agency Partnerships to Break Up Federal Bureaucracy' (2017) <<https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-announces-six-new-agency-partnerships-break-federal-bureaucracy>> accessed 14 May 2026.

¹⁰⁰ Southern Poverty Law Center, 'Trump's Executive Order Dismantling The Department of Education' (n 96).

¹⁰¹ Naaz Modan, 'Education Department paid laid-off OCR staff \$38M while dismissing most complaints' (2026) *Higher Ed Dive* <<https://www.highereddive.com/news/education-department-paid-laid-off-ocr-staff-38m-while-dismissing-most-com/811171/>> accessed 13 May 2026.

¹⁰² Ibid.

disputes, the OCR has increasingly threatened schools and universities with financial sanctions if campus protests over Gaza or transgender participation in sports occurred¹⁰³.

Beyond the Department's structural reorganization, McMahon also made school privatization the administration's top educational priority¹⁰⁴. Measures to redirect public funding away from school system have included increasing the funding of the Charter School Programme, reorienting all departmental grant competitions to include school choice as a supplementary priority and a guidance letter issued in August 2025 further extended federal services to private school students¹⁰⁵.

The ideological ambition behind privatisation has been made explicit by Lindsey Burke, director of the Center for Education Policy at the Heritage Foundation, the think tank whose project 2025 provided the roadmap for Trump's second term educational agenda: *"Instead of funding school systems, we should fund children and move towards policies where dollars follow the children. (...) I'm optimistic that, you know, five years from now a majority of kids are in a private school choice program"*¹⁰⁶.

Privatization goes hand in hand with a weakening of the public functions. The Education Department is also responsible for managing federal funding programmes (Pell grants, federal student loans and loan repayment and forgiveness programs) intended to expand access to higher education. Around thirty percent of college students in the United States rely on these federal loans to pay their tuition¹⁰⁷. Reducing the federal role in educational funding not only means an administrative restructuring, but a neoliberal conception of education as a private investment rather than a collective social good open to everyone. This line of action expects students and families to finance their education, as we will see in the next chapter, through high levels of debt.

¹⁰³Jon Valant, Kenneth K. Wong, Michael Hansen, Katharine Meyer, and Rachel M. Perera, 'Brown Center scholars reflect on education after 1 year of the Trump administration' (2026) Brookings Institution <<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/brown-center-scholars-reflect-on-education-after-1-year-of-the-trump-administration/>> accessed 14 May 2026.

¹⁰⁴Ali Schalop, 'The Plan to Abolish the Education Department – One Year Later' *NEA Today* (2026) <<https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/plan-abolish-education-department-one-year-later>> accessed 13 May 2026.

¹⁰⁵Mebane Rash, 'Educational choice a clear winner so far in McMahon's tenure' *EducationNC* (26 September 2025) <<https://www.ednc.org/educational-choice-a-clear-winner-so-far-in-mcmahons-tenure/>> accessed 13 May 2026.

¹⁰⁶ProPublica, 'Inside the Trump Administration's Plan to Change Public Education' (2026) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NYq_N6fO-w&t> accessed 28 April 2026.

¹⁰⁷Southern Poverty Law Center, 'Trump's Executive Order Dismantling The Department of Education' (n 96).

The consequences of these combined policies (privatisation and the weakening of public functions) fall on the most vulnerable students. Supporting private school vouchers while cutting federal civil rights will resegregate public schools and limit access to quality education for black and brown students, low-income families, and students with disabilities¹⁰⁸. The states most exposed to this dismantling are found in the Deep South: Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Florida, which together serve 6.4 million public school students¹⁰⁹. These states consistently rank among the lowest in state and local education funding, depending on federal contributions well above the national average of 13.7% of public K-12 funding¹¹⁰. The Department is the institutional guarantee of educational access and with these policies, that guarantee is dismantled.

This situation illustrates what Laclau identifies as a central mechanism of right-wing populism: the states most harmed by the dismantling of the Department, are also those whose electorates most consistently support it. Sociologically, Bourdieu's social reproduction explains the structural consequences: without federal intervention to compensate for the inequalities of a decentralised system, the Department removes the only institutional counterweight capable of correcting the reproduction of class.

But these consequences on the most vulnerable, will go unmeasured. Trump administration has also reduced the collection and availability of educational data concerning the needs of schools and families, including information related to school safety, early childhood education, vocational training and support for students with disabilities¹¹¹. And without reliable data, the capacity to name inequality cannot happen and the accountability of institutions disappears, making the effects of privatisation harder to see and prove.

While Trump's executive order's legality is itself contested (president lacks unilateral authority to shut down the department whose functions are mandated by law, mass firings may constitute illegal impoundment under the Impoundment Control Act of 1974, obligations like administration of student loan programs or enforcement of non-discrimination under Title IV of Higher Education Act of 1965 cannot be rescinded¹¹²...), the practical effects of these actions are real

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Schalop, 'The Plan to Abolish the Education Department' (n 104).

¹¹² Southern Poverty Law Center, 'Trump's Executive Order Dismantling the Department of Education' (n 96).

regardless of their ultimate legal outcome. Programmes are disrupted or institutions self-censor out of fear of losing budget before courts intervene.

The administration strategy then operates not through a clean exercise of legal authority, but through institutional uncertainty using the gap between what the law prohibits and what it takes time and resources to stop. The dismantling of the Department of Education is not a retreat of federal power but its deliberate redirection away from equity and civil rights enforcement.

4. Populist Discourse and the Construction of Educational Legitimacy

Before entering the final Chapter, which describes the main policy interventions under Trumpism, it is necessary to refer to the discursive framework as the last piece of the puzzle within which those interventions gain popular legitimacy. Even if the classical theoretical framework has been explained and used, populist narrative becomes the umbrella under which the main policies are being developed building up the antagonist and the enemies that make policies appear as necessary and even as democratic.

4.1. Language and Narratives to Construct Realities

As defined in the first chapter, Bourdieu highlights both the importance of political actors' ability to strategically adjust their language to the social context of their audiences, for the audience to be recognized themselves in them, and the symbolic power they gain when they can do so "*without appearing ignorant or unable to meet (their) expectations*" despite their distance. Researchers within cognate fields, including those focused on populist movements, like Laclau, have extensively examined the role of language in popular mobilization¹¹³.

In the vocabulary deployed by the Trump Administration in public discourse, we can find examples of this. From describing Mexican immigrants as criminals to calling Muslims terrorists or black as violent¹¹⁴, there is always a "the other" that is framed both as the cause of America's

¹¹³ Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (n 23).

¹¹⁴ Justice, 'Teaching in the Time of Trump' (n 37) 39.

state of crisis and as diametrically opposed to Trump¹¹⁵. Trump's rhetoric consistently communicated white supremacy, islamophobia, sexist discrimination, xenophobia and anti-human rights comments. Far from being isolated incidents, these messages are part of a bigger rhetoric strategy, that aims to build realities and normalise them. These ideas become part of a legitimate discourse as public discourses are considered guided by a norm of reasonableness¹¹⁶.

In education, this situation is also repeated. From Trump's side, terms such as "woke", "indoctrination", "critical race theory" function as political instruments of populism. The vocabulary used is part of the broader America in crisis narrative which is also seen in Trump's educational discourse: "schools are in crisis", "teachers are radicals", "parents have lost control of their children's education" or "American values are under threat from a liberal academic elite". This type of discourse, deeply embedded with emotions and nostalgia for the past, generates what Homolar and Scholz have attributed to Laing's concept of *ontological security*¹¹⁷. This type of security refers to the stable sense of identity and belonging that Trump's supporters feel by constructing a clear enemy responsible for their anxieties, becoming these terms Laclau's empty signifiers and leading to Foucault's effects of regime of truth from a discourse.

From Secretary Betsy DeVos, this construction of language has been built through not only the basic notions of populism but also through the basic values of neoliberalism. Two of her highest-ranked keywords used are "freedom" and "choice"¹¹⁸. Both words work as empty signifiers and thus become powerful. As freedom is vague and abstract, people that listen to her from diverse social groups and interests can identify under the same concept and attach their own meanings. Populist actors construct a logic of equivalence¹¹⁹ to unite these diverse actors under "the people" constrained by "the other" who restrict their freedom and which are the educational institutions, universities and government experts that are deciding how education should be organized¹²⁰. As a result, DeVos sets a bridge between neoliberal educational vision (which finds its origin in Friedman as it will be explained in the next chapter) and contemporary right-wing populism.

¹¹⁵ Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz, 'The power of Trump-speak: populist crisis narratives and ontological security' (2018) 32 *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 344, 351
<<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09557571.2019.1575796>> accessed 17 May 2026.

¹¹⁶ Justice, 'Teaching in the Time of Trump' (n 37) 39.

¹¹⁷ Ronald David Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Penguin 1960).

¹¹⁸ Cohen, 'Education Populism?' (n 34) 21.

¹¹⁹ Laclau, *On populist reason* (n 23).

¹²⁰ Cohen, 'Education Populism?' (n 34) 22.

Finally, and in that emotional line mentioned, the narrative operates in what scholars have termed a *post-truth setting* where “*objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief*”¹²¹. Trump’s alternative social media platform called “Truth Social” exemplifies this logic. Opinions are “ReTruthed” as they are affirmed and shared with others¹²². As Liesbet van Zoonen aptly captures through the concept “I-pistemology”, populism positions the individual as the ultimate arbiter of truth, emphasising personal experience as reliable knowledge over collective validated knowledge¹²³. These assertions often disregard how one is connected to or interdependent on others for understanding and transacting with the world.

It is within this populist discourse framework (the construction of the educational enemies, the narrative of an American crisis and the epistemological delegitimization of validated collective knowledge) that policy interventions analysed in the following chapter must be understood.

¹²¹ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “post-truth, adj.” <<https://www.oed.com/?tl=true>> accessed 15 May 2026.

¹²² Sarah M. Stitzlein, ‘Educational Responses to Polarization and Populism’ (2025) 56 *Philosophical Studies in Education* 10, 13 <<https://eric.ed.gov/?q=populism&id=EJ1486176>> accessed 15 May 2026.

¹²³ Liesbet van Zoonen, ‘I-Pistemology: Changing Truth Claims in Popular and Political Culture’ (2012) 27 *European Journal of Communication* 56 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254089325_I-Pistemology_Changing_truth_claims_in_popular_and_political_culture> accessed 15 May 2026.

CHAPTER III: POLICY INTERVENTIONS

1. Introduction: the U.S. Education System

The U.S. education system is broadly divided into K-12 education (kindergarten through twelfth grade), which encompasses elementary, middle and high school, and higher education.

Within K-12, students may attend different types of schools or educational settings. Most students are enrolled in public schools which are primarily funded through state and local taxes. Students may also attend private schools, including historically religious (parochial schools) or independent private schools, which are privately funded through tuition fees and other private sources rather than public taxation.

There are also schools that move students out of their geographically assigned public schools and give families more educational choices¹²⁴. This is the case of charter schools and magnet schools. Charter schools are public schools under growing private management companies¹²⁵. In 2014, out of the 49.7 million students enrolled in public schools, over 5 million (about 10%) opted to attend charter or magnet schools instead of the public school they were originally assigned to¹²⁶. Magnet schools emerged in part because public school districts sought to promote desegregation and improve student outcomes by offering schools with specialized academic themes and curricular orientation¹²⁷.

¹²⁴ Michael Heise, 'From No Child Left Behind to Every Student Succeeds: Back to a Future for Education Federalism' (2017) 117 *Columbia Law Review* <<https://columbialawreview.org/content/from-no-child-left-behind-to-every-student-succeeds-back-to-a-future-for-education-federalism/>> accessed 30 April 2026.

¹²⁵ Preston C. Green, 'Having It Both Ways: How Charter Schools Try to Obtain Funding of Public Schools and the Autonomy of Private Schools' (2013) 43 *Emory Law Journal* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274252073_Having_It_Both_Ways_How_Charter_Schools_Attain_Funding_of_Public_Schools_and_the_Autonomy_of_Private_Schools> accessed 30 April 2026.

¹²⁶ National Center for Education Statistics, 'Digest of Education Statistics: Table 216.20. Number and Enrollment of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by School Level, Type, and Charter and Magnet Status: Selected Years, 1990–91 Through 2013–14' (2015) <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_216.20.asp> archived at <<http://perma.cc/343M-B39S>> accessed 30 April 2026.

¹²⁷ Ellen Goldring and Claire Smrekar, 'Magnet Schools and the Pursuit of Racial Balance' (2000) 33 (1) *Education and Urban Society* <https://www.club.cc.cmu.edu/~scu/8202/magnet_schools_and_racial_balance.pdf> accessed 30 April 2026.

Also, homeschooling constitutes a recognised form of K-12 education and Trump has been clear about his support for, among other education reforms, publicly funded voucher programs that expressly include homeschooling¹²⁸.

Finally, higher education comprises a diverse range of institutions including private universities (among them the Ivy League), mid-tier universities, regional public universities and community colleges.

2. Policy Interventions in K-12

In this next section, policy interventions under Trump on K-12 will be analysed, especially focussing on changes in curriculum, the stop WOKE act, the private school vouchers which we have started discussing and the so-called neutrality of knowledge. As a summary of the laws that have been mentioned, K-12 operated under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (1965) to regulate primary and secondary education, try to reduce educational inequalities, federal funds to schools through the Department of Education. This law was later replaced by the No Child Left Behind (2001) expanding federalism as it included accountability and standardized testing. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) reduced part of this federal control and it is currently the principal federal law in education in the U.S.

2.1. Changes in Curriculum and Moms for Liberty

The Federal Government has historically not been involved in curriculum because various federal statutes restrict the Department of Education, the Secretary of Education and the federal government from intervening directly in curricular matters. In recent years, the Congress has tightened up this language to reinforce these limitations and make clear that states set the

¹²⁸ Yamiche Alcindor, 'Trump's Call for School Vouchers Is a Return to a Campaign Pledge' *N.Y. Times* (1 March 2017) <<http://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/01/us/politics/trump-school-vouchers-campaign-pledge.html?>> accessed 30 April 2026.

curriculum and academic standards¹²⁹. Despite this formal limitation and although populists prefer that curricular standards are set at the state level¹³⁰, Trump has used non-binding guidance signing several executive orders and Dear Colleague Letter (DCL) to promote his policy priorities on K-12 curriculum against diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and to try to terminate the federal funding for schools against them.

One of the main fields that Trump's Administration perceives as problematic in schools is the way United States' past is framed, which is consistent taking into account their slogan is "Make America Great Again". On this line of reshaping how U.S. history should be explained, Trump created the 1776 Commission (1776 Project) in 2020, backed by federal funding. Even if the Commission was terminated in 2021 by President Joe Biden, it has been re-established in 2025. It has the aim of promoting what he described as a "pro-American curriculum" in schools, while proclaiming that Critical Race Theory (CRT) should be banned in education¹³¹, perpetuating the tradition of using the dominant narrative to teach history and social studies topics protecting (white) students from feeling guilt and shame.

CRT originated in critical legal studies, was initially used as an interdisciplinary analysis to expose, call into question and dismantle the structures of power and knowledge that sustain racial inequality¹³². Over time, CRT expanded beyond legal studies into multiple aspects of U.S. society, including education¹³³. In 2020, CRT became a catalyst for a conservative "whitestream public" to organize against growing demands for racial justice¹³⁴. Fox News described CRT as a "destructive, divisive, pseudoscientific ideology" and framed it as "an existential threat to the

¹²⁹ Mark Lieberman and Brooke Schultz, 'Can Trump Do That? Which Actions on Education Are Legal, and Which Ones Aren't' *Education Week* (11 March 2025) <<https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/can-trump-do-that-which-actions-on-education-are-legal-and-which-ones-arent/2025/03>> accessed 13 May 2026.

¹³⁰ M. Danish Shakeel and Paul E. Peterson, 'Are School Reforms Liberal, Conservative, or Populist? Populism and Education Policy Opinions in the United States' (2023) 17 *Journal of School Choice* 465, 479 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15582159.2023.2211799>> accessed 15 May 2026.

¹³¹ Hani Morgan, 'Resisting the Movement to Ban Critical Race Theory from Schools' (2022) 95 *Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies* 35 <<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1332142>> accessed 18 May 2026.

¹³² Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Temple University Press 2013)

¹³³ Gloria Ladson-Billings, 'Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?' 11 *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 7 <<https://thrive.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/Just%20what%20is%20critical%20race%20theory%20and%20whats%20it%20doing%20in%20a%20nice%20field%20like%20education.pdf>> accessed 16 May 2026.

¹³⁴ Lorien S. Jordan, 1 Rachel R. Piontak, Kadesha Treco and Stefanie L. McKoy, 'Enwhitened Spaces: A Critical Race/Critical Whiteness Content Analysis of Whiteness, Disinformation, and Amazon Reviews' 47 *Thresholds in Education* 69, 69 <<https://eric.ed.gov/?q=anti+critical+race+theory&id=EJ1435519>> accessed 16 May 2026.

United States” as it “weaponized against core American values”¹³⁵. Since the broadcast, policymakers, and the media have rallied around anti-CRT disinformation, stoking white people’s fears of “woke education”¹³⁶.

Even if the education is in the hands of states and Trump’s ideas on CRT could seem to not be influential through the DCL or executive orders, the Administration found a way to impose the prohibition on CRT. The U.S. Department of Education further intensified its intervention by requiring state and local education agencies to certify their compliance with the Trump’s administration’s ideas on CRT as it would be considered illegal racial discrimination under Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act¹³⁷. States that refused to comply risked of losing federal education funding. Although a federal court later declared the guidance and certification as unlawful, 21 states had already indicated their willingness to align with the federal position¹³⁸.

Since 2021, nearly one third of states have banned K-12 school curricula that gave a critical view of the racial past of the U. S.¹³⁹ and book banning on DEI books in high school libraries became a reality revealing what scholar Henry Giroux calls *the violence of organized forgetting* as a systematic deliberate effort to erase histories that expose the foundations of capitalism, white supremacy and empire¹⁴⁰. The result of these policies, even if recent, is clear. Social studies curricula that omit critical perspectives serve to disproportionately harm students from marginalized backgrounds¹⁴¹, deepening the inequalities and fostering social reproduction, weakening democracy. Even if there is no direct legal authority on Trump’s Administration towards the education curriculum of states nor the book regulation, the compliance is gained

¹³⁵ Benjamin Wallace-Wells, ‘How a conservative activist invented the conflict over critical race theory’ (2021) *The New Yorker* <<https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-inquiry/how-a-conservative-activist-invented-the-conflict-over-critical-race-theory>> accessed 17 May 2026.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Rachel M. Perera, Thalia González, and Aidan Tomlinson, ‘The status of litigation against the Trump administration’s K-12 education agenda: A guide for education leaders’ (2025) Brookings Institution <<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-status-of-litigation-against-the-trump-administrations-k-12-education-agenda-a-guide-for-education-leaders/>> accessed 18 May 2026.

¹³⁸ Matthew Stone and Mark Lieberman, ‘Illegal’ DEI: See Which States Told Trump Their Schools Don’t Use It’ *Education Week* (10 April 2025) <<https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/see-which-states-are-telling-trump-their-schools-dont-use-illegal-dei/2025/04>> accessed 21 May 2026.

¹³⁹ Olivia B. Waxman, ‘Exclusive: New Data Shows the Anti-Critical Race Theory Movement Is ‘Far From Over’’ (2023) *Time* <<https://time.com/6266865/critical-race-theory-data-exclusive/>> accessed 18 May 2026.

¹⁴⁰ Giroux, ‘The Violence of Organized Forgetting’ (n 48).

¹⁴¹ Dustin Hornbeck and Joe R. Malin, ‘Demobilising knowledge in American schools: censoring critical perspectives’ (2023) 10 *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 1, 2 <<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-023-02161-4>> accessed 18 May 2026.

through financial coercion: threatening to withdrawal of federal funding to compel states to align with federal priorities, without the need of formal legislation.

Soon after, another concept to actively frame and polarize the political debate was introduced by populism: “gender ideology”, working as a powerful ideological tool¹⁴². It started in Florida, regarded as the political laboratory for Trump’s second-term agenda, with the Parental Rights in Education Act (known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill) which initially prohibited classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity¹⁴³. In 2025, Trump signed the executive order “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government” defining gender as binary and biological, putting the financial coercion once again. PEN America noted that while race remained an object of concern, by 2023 the emphasis had shifted clearly towards LGBTQ+ identities as the primary target of educational gag orders¹⁴⁴.

These two waves of curricular intervention did not emerge solely from federal or state action, but there were other actors putting pressure like far-right organisation Moms for Liberty (M4L). M4L started in Florida under the guidance of two former school board members, both mothers, who opposed to school mask mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁴⁵. Like many activists across the country, these mothers argued that preventive mask policies negatively affected children’s well-being, development and especially their language and social skills¹⁴⁶. New evidence has become available showing the concerns were unfounded¹⁴⁷¹⁴⁸, but the organisation pillar is not health, but empty signifiers of liberty, freedom and parental choice which justify the prohibition on CRT and what is described as “gender indoctrination”.

¹⁴² Kathleen Knight-Abowitz and Kathleen M. Sellers, ‘Pragmatist Thinking for a Populist Moment: Democratic Contingency and Racial Re-Valuing in Education Governance’ (2023) 31 *Democracy & Education* 1 <<https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol31/iss1/3/>> accessed 18 May 2026.

¹⁴³ Abbie E. Goldberg, *Impact of HB 1557 (Florida's Don't Say Gay Bill) on LGBTQ+ Parents in Florida* (UCLA 2024) 5 <<https://escholarship.org/content/qt650348qm/qt650348qm.pdf>> accessed 21 May 2026.

¹⁴⁴ PEN America, *America’s Censored Classrooms 2025* (2023) <<https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-classrooms-2023/>> accessed 21 May 2026.

¹⁴⁵ Leyla Weisfeldt and Sara Santiago, ‘How Two Florida Moms Spearheaded a Parent Movement Aiming to Impact the 2022 Elections | CNN Politics’ *CNN* (2021) <<https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/16/politics/florida-parent-power-elections-moms-forliberty/index.html>> accessed 21 May 2026.

¹⁴⁶ Moms for Liberty, ‘Moms for Liberty Teacher Shares Her Concerns About Masks on Her Students’ (2021) <https://web.archive.org/web/20250201233354/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QWX_fKOxtQRE> accessed 21 May 2026.

¹⁴⁷ Jon Hamilton, ‘Do Masks in School Affect Kids’ Speech and Social Skills?’ (2022) National Public Radio <<https://www.npr.org/sections/healthshots/2022/03/15/1086537324/schools-masks-kids-learning-speech-development>> accessed 19 May 2026.

¹⁴⁸ Lorna Bourke, Jamie Lingwood, Tom Gallagher-Mitchell, and Belén López-Pérez, ‘The Effect of Face Mask Wearing on Language Processing and Emotion Recognition in Young Children’ (2023) 226 *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2022.105580>> accessed 19 May 2026.

On CRT, a Tennessee chapter (local M4L branch) filled a complaint on a Ruby Bridges' book that introduced students to Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement on the grounds that it was "Anti-White"¹⁴⁹. Instead, M4L recommended reading *The Making of America* that, for example, portrays slave owners as the "worst victims of slavery"¹⁵⁰. Meanwhile, in a New Hampshire chapter, they offered a \$500 bounty for anyone reporting a teacher for addressing CRT in classroom¹⁵¹. On gender, the M4L celebrated Florida's law and aimed on limiting the students' exposure to books on gender identity and LGBTQ+¹⁵² creating a 111-page book ban guidance singling out titles to remove them from school curricula and libraries. All these oppositions articulated under the banner of "parental rights", which worked as an empty signifier where multiple issues could be united around a common concern for their kids' education.

The Trump agenda for K-12 education seeks to undermine decades of federal, state and local efforts to improve public schools and promote DEI in public education. These two waves of curricular intervention were driven primarily during his first presidency and the early months of his second. However, as PEN America documents, a third and more subtle wave, has emerged that is even harder to identify: the use of the language of "neutrality" to impose curricular restrictions that pursue the same objective but without showing explicitly on the content. This intention especially is taking place in higher education; were university students and faculty have more tools to identify direct censorship. The way in which this third wave operates will be examined in section 3.

2.2. Private School Voucher Programmes

Under the American Dream we previously discussed, Trump Administration used it as an official discourse on promoting school choice even before he was elected¹⁵³. The 2018 Presidential

¹⁴⁹ Southern Poverty Law Center, 'Moms for Liberty' <<https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/moms-liberty/>> accessed 21 May 2026.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Robin Throne and Tricia Stewart, 'A Critical Policy Analysis of Book Bans in U.S. Public Higher Education as Marginalization of Intellectual Freedom' (2024) 5 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382647579_A_Critical_Policy_Analysis_of_Book_Bans_in_US_Public_Higher_Education_as_Marginalization_of_Intellectual_Freedom> accessed 21 May 2026.

¹⁵³ Diane Ravitch, 'When Public Goes Private, as Trump Wants: What Happens?' *The New York Review* (2016) *New York Review of Books* <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/12/08/when-public-goes-private-as-trump-wants-what-happens/>> accessed 30 April 2026.

Proclamation on National School Choice Week explicitly invoked this founding promise, stating that “*Charter schools empower families to pursue the right educational fit for their children, helping to ensure that there are paths to the American Dream that match the needs of students striving to achieve it... My administration is committed to reducing the outsized Federal footprint in education and to empower families, as well as State and local policy makers and educators, with the flexibility to adapt to student’s needs*”¹⁵⁴.

Yet the expansion of school choice depends on voucher programmes and charter schools. The origin of vouchers goes back to the publication of the paper *The Role of Government in Education* (1955) by Economist Milton Friedman who adopted the term “vouchers” as a system through which public funds would be allocated to parents allowing them to select the education services for their children. Friedman defended that the role of the government would be limited to ensure that schools meet certain minimum standards¹⁵⁵, defending free market approach to structural American issues like dismantling segregated public schools. During Ronald Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign, Friedman served as an unofficial advisor and later on President Reagan’s Economic Policy Advisory Board¹⁵⁶.

Friedman’s solution to the so-called “island of socialism in a free market” that was the public school system¹⁵⁷ was clear: competition, choice and a reliance on the free market to guide education policy¹⁵⁸. Since No Child Left Behind, the free market ideas of Friedman, in the form of school choice, have become firmly implanted in education policies and Trump has followed with examples like “One Big Beautiful Bill Act” (OBBBA) policy, redirecting public education funding toward private schooling options¹⁵⁹. As populists are sceptical of governmental institutions, they embrace school choice as alternatives to the public school¹⁶⁰. Trump not only presents vouchers as a democratic tool that allow parents to make a free choice of where to take

¹⁵⁴ National School Choice Week, ‘Presidential Proclamation’ (2018) *Federal Register* <<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2018/01/25/2018-01620/national-school-choice-week-2018>> accessed 29 April 2026.

¹⁵⁵ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 89.

¹⁵⁶ Lanny Ebenstein, *Milton Friedman* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 208.

¹⁵⁷ Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 1980), 154.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid 170.

¹⁵⁹ NAACP Legal Defence and Educational Fund, ‘Trump’s “One Big, Beautiful Bill” Act Explained’ (12 November 2025) <<https://www.naacpldf.org/case-issue/trumps-one-big-beautiful-bill-act-explained/>> accessed 28 May 2026.

¹⁶⁰ M. Danish Shakeel and Paul E. Peterson, ‘Are School Reforms Liberal, Conservative, or Populist? Populism and Education Policy Opinions in the United States’ (2023) 17 *Journal of School Choice* 465, 480 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15582159.2023.2211799>> accessed 15 May 2026.

their kids as it enables families to pay for the tuition at a private school of their choosing, but also as a contribution to racial justice as African Americans would have the opportunity to go to better schools¹⁶¹.

This racial justice argument is in tension with the historical origin of the policy itself. As Fiala and Owens document¹⁶², after learning that southern states were adopting voucher to publicly finance segregated private schools, as a means of evading *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, Friedman adopted a *laissez-faire* attitude rationalising segregated schooling as a legitimate outcome of parental choice¹⁶³. As Ravitch notes, while Friedman “*recognised this was a problem for his proposition*”, it “*did not deter him*” from standing by his free-market approach¹⁶⁴. That the same policy mechanism designed to circumvent racial desegregation is now presented by Trump as a vehicle for Black educational advancement illustrates, in Laclau’s terms, the populist rearticulation of a democratic demand (the right of Black families to quality education) in service of an agenda whose historical roots lie in the precise opposite.

This social reproduction is because the voucher rarely covers the full cost of the private school tuition, meaning that only the families with enough economic resources can cover the remaining costs. Secondly, the public funding allocated to the public schools depends on how many students the school has. This voucher system allows the financially stable families to exit the public system and in doing so, defunding the schools that serve those with no alternative. The National Association of Secondary School Principals and other professional associations have repeatedly expressed concern that the Trump plan would siphon off resources from public schools¹⁶⁵. Third, private schools retain the right to select their students allowing them to exclude children with special needs or disadvantaged backgrounds.

And social reproduction happens not only in the entry of these institutions, but also it is reinforced throughout the schooling experience. Students attending private schools report a higher number

¹⁶¹ Wong, ‘Education Policy Trump Style’ (n 89) 431.

¹⁶² Thomas J. Fiala and Deborah Duncan Owens, Education Policy and Friedmanomics: Free Market Ideology and Its Impact on School Reform (Paper presented at the 68th Annual National Conference of the Midwest Political Science Association 2010), 1, 17 <<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED510611.pdf>> accessed 15 May 2026.

¹⁶³ Milton Friedman, *The Role of Government in Education* (School Choices) <<http://www.schoolchoices.org/roo/fried1.htm>> accessed 15 May 2026.

¹⁶⁴ Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 116.

¹⁶⁵ Associated Press, ‘Trump administration to renew school-choice push with \$5 billion federal-tax-credits proposal’ (2019) MarketWatch <<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/trumpadministration-to-renew-school-choice-push-with-5-billion-federal-tax-credits-proposal2019-02-28>> accessed 15 April 2026.

of extracurricular activities (especially in the area of Athletics¹⁶⁶), more frequent participation in high-level leadership roles (smaller classes) and greater accumulation of awards and academic honours. These advantages are fundamental in the college application process and its admission, as seen in the next section. As a result, students from private schools tend to enter the college admissions system with a stronger portfolio and even intensive support for the college admissions¹⁶⁷ and so social reproduction is continued at a higher level.

And the consequence is not only social reproduction. The neoliberal “individual freedom” framing builds individuals as “responsibilized” subjects who are not only free to make choice but obliged to do them good in order to secure their family and their own welfare¹⁶⁸. Foucault suggests that this form of self-conduct reflects a broader transformation in advanced capitalist societies where individuals become self-entrepreneurial actors responsible for managing their own life trajectories¹⁶⁹. The penetration of market logics into the private sphere of family decision-making (described as “busnopower”¹⁷⁰) represents how educational choices are increasingly shaped by business-oriented mentality: people control themselves following the same rules that the market. The accountability and structural inequalities move then away from the state.

3. Higher Education

Higher education is a primary pathway to economic opportunity and to gain essential skills for career development. But in the United States, the official discourse on higher education consistently frames universities through neoliberalism: individual choice, accountability and consumption. The official speeches promote a business model of higher education¹⁷¹ competing for students, ranking and private funding. This transformation has concrete consequences and the following sections will examine the dimensions of higher education under Trumpism: the

¹⁶⁶ David Card, ‘Expert report’ in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (D mass 2018).

¹⁶⁷ Jerusha Conner, Denise Pope and Sarah Miles, ‘Extracurricular activity in high-performing school contexts: Stress buster, booster or buffer?’ *Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, (28 April 2013).

¹⁶⁸ Suspitsyna, ‘Higher Education for Economic Advancement and Engaged Citizenship’ (n 35) 61.

¹⁶⁹ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (n 31).

¹⁷⁰ Michael Peters, James Marshall and Patrick Fitzsimons, ‘Managerialism and educational policy in a global context: Foucault, neoliberalism, and the doctrine of self-management’ in N.C. Burbules and C.A. Torres (eds), *Globalization and Education: Critical Perspectives* (Routledge 200) 109, 121.

¹⁷¹ Suspitsyna, ‘Higher Education for Economic Advancement and Engaged Citizenship’ (n 35) 64.

stratification of the system between the different universities or institutions and its consequences for social mobility, the deepening inequality of college access and student debt and the attack on institutional neutrality and academic freedom that has conditioned what can be taught and said in American campuses.

3.1. Social mobility: Elite Universities, Mid-Tier Universities, Regional Public Universities and Community Colleges

Thinking of Higher Education in the U.S., universities like Harvard or Stanford come to mind. These elite universities are defined as Tier 1 institutions in Barron's 2009 selectivity ranking although they are commonly referred to "Ivies". The main classification is the Ivy League Plus: the eight Ivy League colleges, University of Chicago, MIT, Stanford and Duke.

Children from the top 1% are about 77 times more likely to attend this type of institutions than those from the lowest income quintile. This was shown in the mobility report cards study where, after using administrative data covering all college students from 1999 to 2013, it was concluded that students from the highest-income families are more represented (14.5%) than those from the lower half of the income distribution (13.5%), while students from the bottom quintile are extremely underrepresented (3.8%)¹⁷². Elite universities are more selective colleges that usually provide, after completed, a clear path towards competitive jobs and prestigious leadership opportunities with almost 60% of students from the bottom quintile reaching the top one.

Nonetheless, these universities are not main motors of mobility nor of democracy, but mid-tier universities and regional public universities (RPU) are. "Mid-tier" is an unofficial classification based on academic reputation and selectivity while "regional" is an official classification to name a public institution, financed by the state aiming to give a service for the state. Most regional public universities are considered mid-tier because they offer high-quality education and professional degrees without extreme competition or a "top tier" search.

¹⁷² Raj Chetty and others, 'Mobility report cards: the role of colleges in intergenerational mobility' (2017) *National Bureau of Economic Research* 1, 1 <https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w23618/w23618.pdf> accessed 13 June 2026.

As for democracy, RPU pride themselves on accepting almost everyone and they have indeed had historical roots in democratizing educational opportunity¹⁷³. Students are most likely to be first generation college students, black students, low-income students, veterans and adults that aim to balance work and family while attending college¹⁷⁴. And evidence¹⁷⁵ still indicates that these institutions have continued to enrol racially and socioeconomically diverse students, despite strong institutional incentives to prioritize prestige¹⁷⁶. These are the type of universities that achieve similar levels of student success as elite while providing greater access for low-income families.

For instance, at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, 51% of students from the lowest income quintile move into the top quintile. Given that 16,4% of its students come from the bottom quintile (compared to the 3,8% at Ivy Plus institutions), Stony Brook achieves a bottom-to-top income mobility rate of 8.4%, which is significantly higher than the 2.2% observed at Ivy-Plus colleges¹⁷⁷. This situation happens in general with mid-tier public universities leading to the conclusion that universities with the highest upward mobility rates are not Ivy League as they admit few low-income students despite their high academic success rates and their much higher sum per student (\$54000 to \$8000 in mid-tier).

As a result, to reach the 20% income bracket, the strongest performers are regional public universities. However, to reach the top 1% the most effective institutions are exclusively highly selective universities institutions¹⁷⁸. No single institution simultaneously combines high success rates for access the top 1% with high enrolment of low-income student. This indicates that the system is structured in a way that access to the highest income positions remain largely in the hands of those who already possess significant capital.

¹⁷³ Bruce B. Henderson, *Teaching at the people's university: An introduction to the state comprehensive university* (Anker Publishing Company 2007).

¹⁷⁴ Jarrett B. Warshaw, Matt DeMonbrun and Jon McNaughtan, 'A Field of Striving or Equity? Regional Public Universities and College Access' (2020) 190 *Wiley Online Library* 25, 25
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/he.20365?saml_referrer> accessed 13 June 2026.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ KerryAnn O'Meara, 'Striving for What? Exploring the Pursuit of Prestige' (2007) 22 *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* 1
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225268964_Striving_for_What_Exploring_the_Pursuit_of_Prestige> accessed 13 June 2026.

¹⁷⁷ Raj Chetty and others, 'Mobility report cards: the role of colleges in intergenerational mobility' (2017) *National Bureau of Economic Research* 1, 3 <https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w23618/w23618.pdf> accessed 13 June 2026.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

Lastly, community colleges in the United States stand between compulsory education and the post-secondary sector. As show in the analysis done by Brand, Pfeffer and Goldrick-Rab on Chicago Public Schools, community college increases the chances of obtaining a bachelor's degree among students who otherwise would not have enrolled in college¹⁷⁹. And even if they don't complete a four-year degree, which would led them to certain disadvantages, attending a community college may still have provided benefits in employment opportunities, family formation, psychological well-being, social integration, and in other outcomes that shape life chances¹⁸⁰.

The American university system operates in exactly the opposite way to how it should if its aim was the American Dream of social mobility and democracy. The institutions with the greatest democratic potential receive fewer resources while the institutions that reproduce social privilege receive more resources and political and public attention. Trump reinforces precisely that inversion: he attacks the elites rhetorically, under populism, but his policies of budget cuts (like the abolition of DEI and the recent federal budget proposals¹⁸¹) primarily harm regional and community colleges serving to those who already hold power. The following section analysis how this distribution is shaped by the unequal college access process.

3.2. Social Reproduction in College Access

Bourdieu and Passeron described that the American education system, once thought to support equality and equity under the American Dream, instead continued to reinforce class stratification¹⁸². This has historically taken explicit examples in the college admission process of

¹⁷⁹ Jennie E. Brand, Fabian T. Pfeffer and Sara Golrick-Rab, 'The Community College Effect Revisited: The Importance of Attending to Heterogeneity and Complex Counterfactuals' (2014) *Sociological Science* 448, 461 <<https://sociologicalscience.com/articles-vol1-25-448/>> accessed 13 June 2026.

¹⁸⁰ Michael Hout, 'Social and Economic Returns to College Education in the United States' (2012) 38 *Annual Review of Sociology* 379 <<https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102503>> accessed 13 June 2026.

¹⁸¹ Maria Carrasco, 'House FY 2027 Budget Proposal Would Cut Campus-Based Aid, Increase Max Pell, and Eliminate Subsidized Loan Funding' (2026) *National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators* <https://www.nasfaa.org/news-item/39083/House_FY_2027_Budget_Proposal_Would_Cut_Campus-Based_Aid_Increase_Max_Pell_and_Eliminate_Subsidized_Loan_Funding> accessed 13 June 2026.

¹⁸² Bourdieu, *Reproduction in Education, Society, & Culture* (n 8).

elite universities, and this is why Akil Bello, advocate for fairness in college admissions does not call them “prestigious universities” but “highly rejective colleges”¹⁸³.

For example, in the early twentieth century, Harvard modified its admissions criteria in order to deliberately reduce the enrolment of Jewish students¹⁸⁴. Similarly, in the 80s, there were changes in admission practices at UC Berkeley with underrepresentation of Asian American applicants¹⁸⁵. Now the selective procedure around elements like race, ethnicity or socioeconomic backgrounds may seem more democratic than those examples but it is still unequal and simply works as a means to preserve legitimacy in dominant groups, despite populist narratives to defend equality.

The probability that high school graduates will go to college decreases as household income declines¹⁸⁶. This decline can already be observed on the first step of the process: college admission process. College applications vary depending on the institution, being more competitive and multidimensional on the Ivy League and lower on regional universities or community colleges. In general, setting aside the personal information and high school transcripts, a student would need to submit certificates of extracurricular activities, recommendation letters and essays¹⁸⁷. It is also possible to submit SAT/ACT scores but since COVID-19 it is optional¹⁸⁸, in the aims of increasing racial diversity, but critiqued by the Trump’s Administration¹⁸⁹. Every criterion on the list finds a way to explain how the application process leads to inequality.

But before analysing every criterion involved in the process of admission, the selection of which university application will be done needs to happen. McDonough argues that students evaluate college opportunities through multiple personal and social factors, including their academic

¹⁸³ Akil Bello, Ideas + Data <<https://akilbello.com/ideas-data>> accessed 13 June 2026.

¹⁸⁴ Ben Sales, ‘Harvard once capped the number of Jews. Is it doing the same thing to Asian Americans now?’ *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (17 October 2018) <<https://www.jta.org/2018/10/17/united-states/harvard-once-capped-the-number-of-jews-is-it-doing-the-same-thing-to-asians-now>> accessed 26 May 2026.

¹⁸⁵ ‘UC Berkeley Apologizes for Policy That Limited Asians’ *LA times* (7 April 1989) <<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-04-07-mn-1075-story.html>> accessed 26 May 2026.

¹⁸⁶ Sandy Baum, ‘College education: Who can afford it?’ in Michael B. Paulsen and John C. Smart, *The Finance of Higher Education: Theory, Research, Policy, & Practice* (Agathon Press 2001).

¹⁸⁷ U.S. Embassy, Things Needed for your U.S. College Application (2022) <https://common.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/85/2022/11/03_Things_needed_for_your_U.S_college_application.pdf> accessed 27 May 2026.

¹⁸⁸ Christopher T. Bennett, ‘Untested admissions: Examining Changes in Application Behaviors and Student Demographics Under Test-Optional Policies’ (2021) 59 (1) *American Educational Research Journal*, 180, 184 <<https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312211003526>> accessed 26 May 2026.

¹⁸⁹ Peter Granville, Denise A. Smith and Stefan Redding Lallinger, ‘College Admissions Are Rigged for the Rich. Trump’s Officials Say, “Keep It That Way”’ *The Century Foundation* (13 March 2025) <<https://tcf.org/content/commentary/college-admissions-are-rigged-for-the-rich-trumps-officials-say-keep-it-that-way/>> accessed 26 May 2026.

performance, financial situation, field of vision and individual values¹⁹⁰. Families' values contribute to shaping the student sense of belonging, influencing how they understand the range of opportunities available to them. The fact that many high-achieving students from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds do not apply to elite universities¹⁹¹ illustrates this influence of dominant narratives, habitus and educational aspirations, recalling on Bourdieu's "internalization of their failures".

Lower social status students tend to "self-eliminate" by choosing not to enrol in higher education after receiving low admissions scores or experiencing difficulties during education, decreasing their individual aspirations. Further investigation by Hoxby and Avery, reaffirmed this idea and stated that many high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds do not apply to selective higher education institutions¹⁹². This self-elimination also finds its reason on the academic curriculum that students will be taught at university. The academic curriculum tends to promote and legitimize forms of knowledge associated with the dominant groups. As a result, there is a marginalization of alternative knowledge systems associated with women, working-class or minority perspectives¹⁹³, discouraging vulnerable students.

As a result, even academically successful students from these backgrounds tend to limit their application to less selective and "safer" institutions taking the form of regional public universities. As regional public universities receive less funding, the resources are then fewer to very capable and outstanding students that would deserve a better quality in order to flourish. Consequently, undermatching not only represents a real loss of opportunity to students but also a major loss of talent for the country¹⁹⁴.

Considering this already unequal setting, the criterion of every application will be described. Firstly, the extracurricular activities criterion. Extracurricular activities can go from sport and

¹⁹⁰ Patricia M. McDonough, *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity* (State University of New York Press 1997) 151 <<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED415323>> accessed 24 May 2026.

¹⁹¹ Steven Elías Alvarado and Ruth N. Lopez-Turley, 'College-bound Friends and College Application Choices: Heterogeneous Effects for Latina/o and White Students' (2012) 41 (6) *Social Science Research*.

¹⁹² Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery, 'The Missing 'One-Offs: The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low-Income Students' (2013) *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* 1 <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2013a_hoxby.pdf> accessed 24 May 2026.

¹⁹³ Henry A. Giroux, 'Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education: A Critical Analysis' (1983) 53 (3) *Harvard Educational Review* 257 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374130308_Reprint_Theories_of_Reproduction_and_Resistance_in_the_New_Sociology_of_Education_A_Critical_Analysis> accessed 24 May 2026.

¹⁹⁴ D. Crystal Byndloss and others, *In Search of a Match: A Guide for Helping Students Make Informed College Choices* (MRDC 2015).

music to community service or debate. These have increasingly become a way for students to differentiate themselves in the college application process¹⁹⁵, both in quantity and quality.

As for quantity, Park et Al. have taken a sample of almost 6M application from the Common Application database, which is a unified postsecondary application platform serving over 800 institutions and the greatest collection of college applications in the U.S. Through their analyses, they found that white, Asian American, high socioeconomic status, and private school students, reported significantly higher levels of extracurricular activities, including greater participation in activities associated with top-level leadership roles and achievements¹⁹⁶. The “opportunity effect” can explain these higher levels of extracurricular activities: more economic resources lead to more trials of activities and thus more probabilities of finding the one you are more talented at¹⁹⁷, acquiring more recognition and honours for it.

But even if lower socioeconomic students manage to obtain extracurricular activities, they will not be selected in the same way depending on the race and ethnicity given policies’ contribution on racial stratification¹⁹⁸. For example, Harvard has both an athletic rating and an extracurricular rating to operate in the criteria explained and so being a recruited athlete will make a decisive impact on your admission for the institution. Evidence from *Students for Fair Admission v. Harvard* revealed that 88% of nationally recruited athletes who applied were admitted between 2014 and 2019¹⁹⁹. However, non-recruited athletes are evaluated through a rating system. Within this category, this case showed that White applicants were twice (14%) as likely to receive a high athletic rating as Black applicants (7%) of getting admission²⁰⁰, indicating racial disparities in how athletic potential is assessed in the admission process.

But this opportunity effect does not consider the quality of the activities. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have also fewer opportunities to participate in elite extracurriculars

¹⁹⁵ Michael N. Bastedo and Allyson Flaster, ‘Conceptual and Methodological Problems in Research on College Undermatch’ (2014) 43 (2) *Educational Researcher* 93 <<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X14523039>> accessed 26 May 2026.

¹⁹⁶ Julie J. Park and others, ‘Inequality Beyond Standardized Tests: Trends in Extracurricular Activity Reporting in College Applications Across Race and Class’ 62(2) *American Educational Research Journal* 2, 3 <<https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai23-749.pdf>> accessed 26 May 2026.

¹⁹⁷ Uma Mazyck Jayakumar and Scott E. Page, ‘Cultural Capital and Opportunities for Exceptionalism: Bias in University Admissions’ (2021) 92 *The Journal of Higher Education* 1109, 1117 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00221546.2021.1912554>> accessed 26 May 2026.

¹⁹⁸ M. E. Horvat, ‘Understanding equity and access in higher education: The Potential Contribution of Pierre Bourdieu’ in J.C. Smart, *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* 16 (Agathon Press 2001)195-238.

¹⁹⁹ *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (D Mass 2018) Civil Action No. 14-cv-14176-ADB, Document 415-1

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

typically associated with higher-SES students²⁰¹, which receive institutional recognition. And this recognition is linked to cultivation and habitus, driven by social class²⁰². In one study of 34 admissions officers from 17 elite colleges, athletics was considered as the most attractive extracurricular activity²⁰³. However, as Golden defends on his book *The Price of Admission*, the sports most valued in university admissions (rowing, fencing, polo, horseback riding...) are mostly practiced in prep schools or wealthy neighbourhoods where parents have the means to afford pay-to-play summer leagues with coaches from elite universities²⁰⁴. Students from private schools report, on average, 17.3% more extracurricular activities, including 35.8% more Athletics activities, than in public school students²⁰⁵. As a result, one of the main criteria that benefits in admissions is also one of the most inaccessible to lower-income students.

Secondly, the essay criterion. Normally, most universities require at least one essay which is a Personal Statement. Bourdieu's concepts on cultural capital guide our explanation. Linguistic capital is defined as the knowledge and capacity to use linguistic forms and styles in a given social context²⁰⁶ while narrative capital is the raw narrative materials that go into storytelling and self-presentation²⁰⁷ depending heavily on familiarity with both language and culture²⁰⁸. This linguistic capital valued by the dominant academic culture is precisely owned by middle and upper-middle class who possess this habitus²⁰⁹. These two elements together with the fact that dominant classes are predominantly English speakers and can afford private college counselling advisors to help them on their personal statements, create a great disadvantage for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Essays part end up rewarding proximity to dominant narratives while presenting such evaluation as neutral or merit-based.

And thirdly, the recommendation letter. Students from private schools and higher income families have access to people who have more time to dedicate to each letter and familiarity with the needs

²⁰¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste* (Harvard University Press 1984).

²⁰² Bourdieu, *Reproduction in Education, Society, & Culture* (n 8).

²⁰³ Leslie Killgore, 'Merit and Competition in Selective College Admissions' (2009) 32 (4) *The Review of Higher Education* 469, 473 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.0.0083>> accessed 26 May 2026.

²⁰⁴ Daniel Golden, *The Price of Admission* (Crown, 2006).

²⁰⁵ Julie J. Park and others, 'Inequality Beyond Standardized Tests: Trends in Extracurricular Activity Reporting in College Applications Across Race and Class' 62(2) *American Educational Research Journal* 2, 20 <<https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai23-749.pdf>> accessed 26 May 2026.

²⁰⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Harvard University Press 1991).

²⁰⁷ AJ Alvero, Jasmine Pal and Katelyn M. Moussavian, 'Linguistic, cultural, and narrative capital: computational and human readings of transfer admissions essays' 5 *Journal of Computational Social Science* 1709, 1714 <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42001-022-00185-5>> accessed 27 May 2026.

²⁰⁸ Christopher George Takacs, 'Becoming Interesting: Narrative Capital Development at Elite Colleges' (2020) 43(1) *Qualitative Sociology* 255 <[10.1007/s11133-020-09447-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-020-09447-y)> accessed 27 May 2026.

²⁰⁹ Bourdieu, *Reproduction in Education, Society, & Culture* (n 8).

of elite college admissions. Belasco et al. analysing over 615,000 counsellor letters submitted through the Common Application, found that students from private schools and high-income families consistently received longer and more detailed letters across academic, extracurricular and personal domains. Meanwhile, lower-income students' letters tended to be smaller and focus on explaining their financial circumstances rather than highlighting their intellectual promise, repositioning them as cases of resilience rather than candidates of excellence²¹⁰.

These three are the key elements when writing an application and how it is conditioned by your class and race, but other more explicit factors take a role in the college access: being a child of an Alumni (known as legacy admission) and making a donation to the institution. Both are quite straight forward that highlight inequality but still are very present on universities. As for donations, even Harvard has formalized a system for the wealthiest donors (\$1 million or more) through the creation of Harvard's Committee on University Resources (COUR). Within COUR, 336 children have actually attended Harvard after donation, perpetuating socioeconomic inequality²¹¹.

Concerning alumni, this means that being the child of an Alumni gives more chances of getting admitted. And this is considered by roughly 500 universities, including the Ivy League and more than half of the nation's 100 most selective U.S. schools²¹². For example, in the Harvard website to this matter it is reported that *"The application process is the same for all candidates. Among a group of similarly distinguished applicants, the children of Harvard College alumni/ae may receive an additional look."*²¹³. In practice, this translates in that legacies receive 40% boost in their chances of admission, according to Harvard's own analysis²¹⁴.

The reaction of the Trump administration to this alumni criterion is that, while he has put pressure on colleges to eliminate any consideration of race, sex in college admission under the pretext of

²¹⁰ Brian Heseung Kim and others, 'Letters of Recommendation by High School Counselors in Selective College Admissions: Differences by Race and Socioeconomic Status in Letter Length and Topics Discussed' (2025) 66 (5) *Research in Higher Education* 1 <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11162-025-09847-5>> accessed 27 May 2026.

²¹¹ Richard D. Kahlenberg, 'Expert Report of Richard D Kahlenberg' (Doc 416-1, *Students for Fair Admissions v Harvard*, 2018) 1, 34 <<https://studentsforfairadmissions.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Doc-416-1-Kahlenberg-Expert-Report.pdf>> accessed 26 May 2026.

²¹² Collin Binkley, 'Critics say Trump's push for fairness in college admissions is leaving out legacy' *PBS News* (15 August 2025) <<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/critics-say-trumps-push-for-fairness-in-college-admissions-is-leaving-out-legacy-preferences>> accessed 26 May 2026.

²¹³ Harvard College, 'Are My Chances of Admission Enhanced If a Relative Has Attended Harvard? (FAQ)' <<https://college.harvard.edu/resources/faq/are-my-chances-admission-enhanced-if-relative-has-attended-harvard>> accessed 26 May 2026.

²¹⁴ Kahlenberg, 'Expert Report of Richard D Kahlenberg' (n 214) 31.

promoting equality and not meritocracy, he has not addressed the so-called legacy admissions²¹⁵. This is even more paradoxical as most legacies are indeed white²¹⁶. The equity-based policies that Trump attempt to dismantle because they “*perpetuate a dangerous badge of inferiority, destroys confidence, and does nothing to identify or solve the most pressing challenges for aspiring young people*”²¹⁷ are, in reality, the ones fighting for the equality he claims to defend.

And perhaps, the most revealing and shocking is that, after everything, even if a student with all the valued conditions of the dominant group would fail to be admitted, he can still be part of a university like Harvard through the special admissions pathway known as the “Z-list”. This list allows a small number of wealthy or well-connected students, that despite not meeting the standard admissions, they can be admitted under the condition of postponing enrolment for one year²¹⁸. The Z-list is the biggest representation of social reproduction and how college (access) becomes an instrument for dominant groups to preserve their legitimacy.

All these explained structural inequalities in college access do not only frame a sociological issue, but they are the representation and the field where the right-wing populism is working. The Trump’s Administration educational agenda in higher education targets mechanisms to compensate inequalities, like diversity programmes or test-optional policies, leaving untouched the mechanisms that reproduce them: legacy admissions, donor preferences and the Z-list or not reforming the rest of the criteria in the application.

The conclusion of college admission is somehow of a paradox: although education is commonly presented as a means of achieving social mobility, according to the American Dream, it really works only on those families and individuals who can access it, which are already part of the dominant social structure. Higher levels of financial, social and cultural capital position allow high-class students to maximize their competitiveness in college admissions²¹⁹, improving even

²¹⁵ Collin Binkley, ‘Critics say Trump’s push for fairness in college admissions is leaving out legacy’ *PBS News* (15 August 2025) <<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/critics-say-trumps-push-for-fairness-in-college-admissions-is-leaving-out-legacy-preferences>> accessed 26 May 2026.

²¹⁶ Shane LaGesse, ‘Legacy Admissions: What It Is and Why Colleges Are Reconsidering It’ *U.S. News* (21 July 2023) <<https://www.usnews.com/higher-education/articles/legacy-admissions-what-it-is-and-why-colleges-are-reconsidering-it>> accessed 26 May 2026.

²¹⁷ Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education (Washington Examiner, 1 October 2025) <<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Compact-for-Academic-Excellence-in-Higher-Education-10.1.pdf>> accessed 27 May 2026.

²¹⁸ Kahlenberg, ‘Expert Report of Richard D Kahlenberg’ (n 214) 34.

²¹⁹ Julie J. Park and others, ‘Inequality Beyond Standardized Tests: Trends in Extracurricular Activity Reporting in College Applications Across Race and Class’ 62(2) *American Educational Research Journal* 2, 28 <<https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai23-749.pdf>> accessed 26 May 2026.

more their probabilities of success. Higher education thus becomes a field of power where dominant groups reproduce their legitimacy and right-wing populism attacks on diversity and equity policies do not challenge structural inequalities but contribute to preserve existing hierarchies.

3.3. Social Reproduction in Student Loan Debt

For those who do manage to access higher education, student debt becomes part of the U.S. education experience. During the post-war mixed economy model, public higher education was substantially funded by the states, in the aim of keeping tuition and fees inexpensive and accessible. With the neoliberal policy agenda, especially in Reagan's era, the State has progressively privatized the public higher education, increasingly placing the financial responsibility into the students and their families. In the 1950s, student loans by the U.S. government first became available under the National Defence Education Act, but it was not until the implementation of Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 that they become more broadly accessible²²⁰ beginning to shift the conception of public higher education from a social institution to an industry²²¹.

As college is becoming more expensive, students are increasingly relying on student loans to pay for it. Student debt affects approximately 44.7 million debtors in the United States, with total outstanding loans exceeding \$1.71 trillion²²². While borrowing may improve some students' chances of enrolling and completing higher education, it does not affect all students equally and there is a different burden of debt. At the graduate level, overall student debt is increasing with Black and Hispanic graduate students experiencing the steepest growth in debt levels compared to other groups²²³.

²²⁰ Amanda R. Baker, Benjamin D. Andrews, Anne McDaniel, 'The impact of student loans on college access, completion, and returns' (2017) 11 (6) *Sociology Compass* 1, 2
<<https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/soc4.12480>> accessed 24 May 2026.

²²¹ Philip G. Altbach, Patricia J. Gumpert, D. Bruce Johnstone, *In defense of American Higher Education* (John Hopkins University Press 2001) 85.

²²² Luv Jawahrani, 'Student Loans in America' (2022) 6 (10) *International Journal of Scientific Research in Engineering and Management (IJSREM)* 1, 1
<<https://ijsrem.com/uploads/production/Student%20Loans%20in%20America.pdf>> accessed 24 May 2026.

²²³ Karen L. Webber and Rachel A. Burns, 'The price of access: Graduate student debt for students of color 2000 to 2016' (2022) 93 (6) *The Journal of Higher Education* 934 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2022.2044976>> accessed 28 May 2026.

The perpetuation of this system is reinforced and worsened by Trump’s “One Big Beautiful Bill Act” (OBBBA). As explained, federal student loans help eligible students cover the cost of higher education and it does this through different types of repayment plans. With the approval of this new policy, the student debt conditions will negatively change by putting limits on money borrowed (loan caps) and limiting to two the repayment plans, among others²²⁴.

Under Biden, a student loan relief plan was starting to be developed, but the Supreme Court argued that the executive branch lacked the legal authority to unilaterally cancel student debt²²⁵. In the end, under the Higher Education Act, the Administration developed debt-relief initiatives by reducing repayment burdens and expanding access to loan forgiveness. Now, under Trump’s administration loan forgiveness mechanisms are being eliminated under this new policy while others are being limited.

Saving on a Valuable Education (SAVE) programme, introduced under Biden administration to improve low-income borrowers’ conditions by reducing monthly payments and expanding access to debt forgiveness, is being phased out. Under OBBBA, it has been scheduled for elimination by this summer, and so borrowers will be forced to change their plan or automatically reassigned²²⁶. Other plans such as the Income-Contingent Repayment (ICR) and the Pay as Your Earn (PAYE) will be phased out by July 2028²²⁷. From this date on, the Repayment Assistance Plan (RAP) will become the main income-based option which requires up to 30 years of repayment before loan forgiveness, extending borrowers’ long-term debt obligations, increasing the burden especially for low-income students.

As for plan limitations, there are two examples. Firstly, the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF). The Trump administration is planning to limit eligibility for former students whose work has a “substantive illegal purpose” referring to NGO working on immigrants and transgender youth.²²⁸ And secondly, the existing Income-Based Repayment (IBR) plan, which increases the

²²⁴ NAACP Legal Defence and Educational Fund, ‘Trump’s “One Big, Beautiful Bill” Act Explained’ (12 November 2025) <<https://www.naacpldf.org/case-issue/trumps-one-big-beautiful-bill-act-explained/>> accessed 28 May 2026.

²²⁵ Amy Howe, ‘Supreme Court strikes down Biden student-loan forgiveness program’ *SCOTUSblog* (30 June 2023) <<https://www.scotusblog.com/2023/06/supreme-court-strikes-down-biden-student-loan-forgiveness-program/>> accessed 28 May 2026.

²²⁶ Shannon Bradley, ‘Trump and Student Loans: What’s Happening with SAVE, Wage Garnishment, Repayment Plans, and More’ *NerdWallet* (8 June 2026) <<https://www.nerdwallet.com/student-loans/learn/trump-student-loans>> accessed 10 June 2026.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ Jennifer L. Steele, ‘Trump is changing student loan forgiveness rules – barring some public workers from getting relief, but resuming it for others’ *The Conversation* (3 November 2025)

income-based protections available for students, will be limited as it will only remain an option for current borrowers whose loans were issued before July 2026, and will not be accessible for future borrowers, narrowing repayment protections for new students²²⁹.

Aid from the government also takes the shape of Pell Grant which is a form of need-based federal financial aid which do not need to be repaid in the aim of helping low-income students. Each year, 7 million students from vulnerable backgrounds benefit from them, from which 60% black students rely on them, including 73% of Historically Black Colleges and Universities²³⁰. Under OBBBA, Pen Grants will be expanded, but only for short programmes. This describes again the “fantasy economy” where instead of making university more accessible for all, there is more funding towards an education that keep the most vulnerable students on jobs of lower qualification that do not allow upwards mobility.

The effect of this new policy leading to a standard plan will especially worsen the situation of Black students, low-income students or students aiming for degrees in Law and Medicine which depend on the federal funding²³¹. As a result, social reproduction will be perpetuated, leading to economic inequality in the future. But education inequality goes beyond the economic differences. Wolfe and Haveman share how the consequences include factors as: lower health status, less efficient consumer choices, fertility choices (decisions on teenagers and nonmarital childbearing) and an increased likelihood for criminal activity²³². Similarly, Ladson-Billings highlights how marginalised communities are frequently excluded from political representation and civic engagement as well²³³ and this is especially evident for stop-out students as it will be argued in the next section.

<<https://theconversation.com/trump-is-changing-student-loan-forgiveness-rules-barring-some-public-workers-from-getting-relief-but-resuming-it-for-others-268351>> accessed 28 May 2026.

²²⁹ Bradley, ‘Trump and Student Loans’ (n 226).

²³⁰ NAACP Legal Defence and Educational Fund, ‘Trump’s “One Big, Beautiful Bill” Act Explained’ (12 November 2025) <<https://www.naacpldf.org/case-issue/trumps-one-big-beautiful-bill-act-explained/>> accessed 28 May 2026.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Barbara Wolfe and Robert Haveman, ‘Social and Non-Market Benefits from Education in an Advanced Economy’ (2002)

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5027223_Social_and_nonmarket_benefits_from_education_in_an_advanced_economy> accessed 24 May 2026.

²³³ Gloria Ladson-Billings, ‘From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools’ (2006) 35 (7) Educational Researcher 3

<https://thrive.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/From%20the%20Achievement%20Gap%20to%20the%20Education%20Debt_Understanding%20Achievement%20in%20US%20Schools.pdf> accessed 24 May 2026.

3.3.1. Stop-out Students and Democracy Erosion

Even if the borrowing may improve some student's chances of enrolling in and completing higher education, it can also constrain their long-term economic prospects, especially those who do not finish college and have a debt to pay²³⁴. Students who accumulate debt without completing their degree are nearly one-third of borrowers²³⁵, around 31 million students²³⁶. These students, coming from vulnerable backgrounds, remain with the burden of repayment obligations, especially now under the OBBBA without options of extension, while not having the economic advantages linked to higher education.

In democracy, this situation translates into less democratic and political engagement from the most vulnerable citizens. While in college, students whose debt burdens represent a large proportion of their family income engage less with college activities linked to civic gains. The reasons behind it could be associated to the fact that families who take out loans to attend higher education experience great levels of tension, stress and anxiety²³⁷ or that they take on jobs at the same time to start paying the debt off having then less time for this type of activities. At the same time, as they have more debt, they have more probabilities of not completing their degree and so becoming stop-out students.

Stop-out students are also less involved in politics. The research done by Johnston and O'Brien studies the relationship between student loan debt and democratic participation. It shows the first steps of evidence on how stop-out students are less likely to vote, contact public officials and take interest in politics²³⁸. Other studies also show this direct link between high debt levels are less

²³⁴ Brandon A Jackson and John R Reynolds, 'The price of opportunity: Race, student loan debt, and college achievement' (2013) 83 (3) *Sociological Inquiry*, 335 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264486728_The_Price_of_Opportunity_Race_Student_Loan_Debt_and_College_Achievement> accessed 24 May 2026.

²³⁵ Lynn O'Shaughnessy, 'Third of student borrowers never earned degree' *CBS News* (28 June 2013) <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/third-of-studentloan-borrowers-never-earned-degree/>> accessed 28 May 2026.

²³⁶ National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, *Some College, No Degree: A National View of Students with Some College Enrollment, But No Completion* (Signature Report No. 7 2014) 1 <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/NSC_Signature_Report_7.pdf> accessed 28 May 2026.

²³⁷ Richard Cooke and others, 'Student debt and its relation to student mental health' (2004) 28 (1) *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 53 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877032000161814>> accessed 28 May 2026.

²³⁸ Travis Johnston and Erin O'Brien, 'Bad Lessons: Policy Feedback and the Democratic Costs of Student Loan Debt' (2025) 48 (3) *The Review of Higher Education* 379, 397 <<https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/954240/pdf>> accessed 28 May 2026.

probability to enter public interest careers²³⁹. The reasons behind are multiple. On one hand, the explanation is found in the debt they carry as the democratic engagement of stop-out is lower when comparing it with individuals with the same educational level (but no debt)²⁴⁰. On the other hand, stop-out students do not want to be on public jobs where they are probably less paid, making it harder to pay back the debt. This disengagement towards the public sphere and resentment for the debt is what the right-wing populism exploits for the legitimating narrative.

The graduate with debt who cannot afford civic participation (within college or after quitting) and who blames a distant academic elite for their precarity is precisely the political subject that Trumpist populism addresses. This is because having an unaffordable student debt motivates students to drop off and as a result the student will not engage in college activities that develop critical thinking and engagement to politics. Moreover, not forgiving the debt to students that did not finish college develop remorse and unpleasant feelings that populism actively exploits. For right-wing populism, there are interests to perpetuate this situation where stop-out students blame academic elites and bureaucracy for individual precarity while the government hides the structural decisions, like OBBBA, that actively highlight it.

3.4. Institutional Neutrality and Academic Freedom

The concept of institutional neutrality in higher education began in 1967 Kalven Report of the University of Chicago when there were escalating campus tensions regarding the university's involvement in social and political issues, especially regarding the Vietnam war. On the report, it argued for "*a heavy presumption against university taking collective action or expressing opinions on the political and social issues of the day or modifying its corporate activities to foster social or political values, however compelling and appealing they may be*". The goal underlying was protecting academic freedom and diversity so that the university did not take a political stance that would pressure faculty or students to conform.

²³⁹ Jesse Rothstein and Cecilia Elena Rouse, 'Constrained after college: Student loans and early-career occupational choices' (2011) 95 (1-2) *Journal of Public Economics* 149, 150 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2010.09.015>> accessed 28 May 2026.

²⁴⁰ Travis Johnston and Erin O'Brien, 'Bad Lessons: Policy Feedback and the Democratic Costs of Student Loan Debt' (2025) 48 (3) *The Review of Higher Education* 379, 397 <<https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/954240/pdf>> accessed 28 May 2026.

But while the report advocated for neutrality or silence on political controversies, the report established an exception: universities may need to intervene when their core values of free enquiry are threatened. However, it left the ambiguity on what a threat would be for universities and who would decide if it were leaving a contested framework that already set a debate back in the 70s. It is precisely this ambiguity that makes institutional neutrality available for political instrumentalization: it allows an actor with power to invoke the concept of neutrality selectively defining as “ideological” the perspectives they wish to eliminate while presenting their own positions as neutral.

Trump Administration uses precisely this gap claiming that the curriculum, CRT or LGBTQ+ inclusion are “ideological positions” that violate neutrality. The Administration Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education calls for universities to “*maintain institutional neutrality at all levels of their administration*”²⁴¹. The president has appointed a task force of 20 administration officials to investigate if universities are following neutrality. This task force meets weekly in Washington to examine reports on discrimination on university campuses, evaluate university grant funding and prepare recommendations for Mr. Trump²⁴².

The task force started with elite universities, like Harvard, where it demanded to immediately close programs related to DEI. Harvard refused and the task force announced a freeze of more than \$2.2 billion in grants and contracts for the university. Following this same line, suspension of funding and student visas revoked has happened in other 60 institutions²⁴³. Concerning the Gaza war, student leaders have been suspended and teachers removed from leadership roles for organising protests related to it at Columbia University²⁴⁴. And in University of Southern California, the administration cancelled the speech of Palestinian American student due to “security concerns”²⁴⁵. Moreover, some international students have lost their visas after

²⁴¹ Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education (n 217).

²⁴² Michael C Bender, Alan Blinder and Jonhatan Swan, ‘Inside Trump’s Pressure Campaign on Universities’ *The New York Times* (14 April 2025) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/14/us/politics/trump-pressure-universities.html>> accessed 22 May 2026.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Christopher L Eisgruber, ‘The Cost of the Government’s Attack on Columbia’ *The Atlantic* (19 March 2025) <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/03/columbia-academic-freedom/682088/>> accessed 22 May 2026.

²⁴⁵ Arwa Mahdawi, ‘Will the ‘cancel culture’ crowd speak up about the silencing of Asna Tabassum? Don’t hold your breath’ *The Guardian* (17 April 2024) <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/apr/17/usc-valedictorian-speechcanceled-palestine>> accessed 22 May 2026.

participating in protests while others even been deported after graduation and faculty members have been fired for expressing public statements challenging the federal political narrative²⁴⁶.

The result is that the Administration define what are “ideological positions” that violate neutrality, while simultaneously blocking universities from using the Kalven exception to defend themselves since the defence is called a political act. And so, it is not a genuine neutrality but used as a justification to eliminate programmes or silence perspectives that do not align with the federal political agenda.

All these actions are part of the increasing restriction on campus protest and speech, especially when such expression contests state violence or dominant geopolitical interests. Despite claims that neutrality preserves institutional autonomy, these responses suggest that neutrality often functions as complicity, failing to defend the restriction of the opposing voices²⁴⁷. As Brewer and Young argue, neutrality as a strategy always supports status quo. To remain neutral in the face of structural inequality is not to be impartial, but to take the side of those who benefit from existing arrangements²⁴⁸.

This strategy is illustrated by how broadly some compulsory neutrality policies are. For example, a policy from Florida Board of Governors, prohibits funding for campus activities “*intended to achieve a desired result*” on issues considered to “*polarize or divide society among political, ideological, moral or religious beliefs, positions or norms*” and, as the Board has the authority to decide which activities fall under this definition, the rule then gives wide discretion to dictate which universities initiatives are inappropriate²⁴⁹ under the cover of institutional neutrality.

These policies work because they are based on a populist narrative that promotes fear. Glassner explains in his book how media and policy manufacture fear to drive public opinion. His perspective explains how socially constructed fears (like claims on left wing indoctrination in universities) has been used strategically to justify restrictions on academic freedom and institutional independence. These narratives frequently work due to repetition and emotional appeal, as analysed in the populist narratives, not on empirical evidence. They become especially

²⁴⁶ Curtis Brewer and Michelle D. Young, ‘The politics of institutional neutrality: ambiguity, fear, and the effort to silence higher education in the USA’ (2025) 10 *Frontiers in Education* 1, 6
<<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/education/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1639020/full>> accessed 22 May 2026.

²⁴⁷ Ibid 6.

²⁴⁸ Ibid 8.

²⁴⁹ Florida Board of Governors, Reg. 9.016 Prohibited Expenditures (Draft Regulation, October 2023)
<<https://www.flbog.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Draft-Regulation-9.016.pdf>> accessed 21 May 2026.

influential in education where debates on identities and social values are highly politicised. Glassner demonstrates how fear-based narratives can overpass rational public debate and generate support for anti-democratic educational measures²⁵⁰.

Faced with these pressures, American Association of University Professors (AAUP), shared an open faculty letter on federal threats to academic freedom and institutional autonomy, titled “We Must Leverage the Strength of Our Institutions and Stand Together”²⁵¹. The letter urged higher education leaders to build a coalition to defend academic freedom, institutional independence, and the protection of students and scholars who were being targeted. It also pointed out that Trump administration’s actions put in danger free speech, due process and the very foundations of inquiry on which academic institutions are built.

Both Bourdieu and Foucault can help to summarize the ideas of this section. In Bourdieu's terms, what is ultimately at stake in this dispute is symbolic power: the capacity to define what counts as legitimate knowledge, what perspectives deserve institutional protection, and whose version of "neutrality" becomes the norm. And, remembering Foucault, the claim of neutrality is itself the most powerful discourses as they present themselves as not being discourses at all.

4. Sites of Resistance: Teachers, Librarians and Teacher’s Unions

It has been described the tendency in education in the U.S. (and worldwide²⁵²) towards neoliberalism and the limitation of the state, emphasizing competition, efficiency and a test-based accountability. The consequences of this shaping of power have been a deepening of inequality and a weakening democracy, according to sociological and political theory. But Foucault defended that “*where there is power, there is resistance*”²⁵³ and the resistance here takes the form of, not only students as we have described already, but as teachers, librarians and teachers unions.

²⁵⁰ Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (Basic Books 1999).

²⁵¹ American Association of University Professors (AAUP), ‘Faculty Letter Calls for Interuniversity Defense of Higher Education’ (2025) *Academe Blog* <<https://academeblog.org/2025/04/01/faculty-letter-calls-for-interuniversity-defense-of-higher-education/>> accessed 22 May 2026.

²⁵² Huidan Niu, ‘How do teacher unions frame professionalism discourses in contemporary socio-political contexts? A systematic literature review’ (2025) 55 (2) *Cambridge Journal of Education* 287, 290

<<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/0305764X.2025.2486982?needAccess=true>> accessed 18 June 2026.

²⁵³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (n 29).

When it comes to democracy, teachers are usually defenders on democratic principles. The United States have historically been consistent and loyal to the statement on how public education contributes to democratic citizenship and democracy. But, even if patriotic, Donald Trump has not followed these foundations on his populist speeches and racist practices. Examples previously described on DEI policies, on teaching a specific perspective on America's history or promoting the killing of families' terrorists²⁵⁴ does not follow democratic norms.

Many educators acted in line with a firm defence of democratic values in response to this anti-democratic rhetoric with the intention of influencing public deliberation around the meaning of democracy²⁵⁵. Teachers have publicly challenged discourses that promoted racism, sexism, xenophobia agreeing with the statement that schools cannot treat Trump's anti-human rights statements a matter of legitimate controversy²⁵⁶. In classrooms, educators are finding new ways to teach. Sometimes they rename their lessons, others they swap textbooks or worksheets for oral history or even they move from scripted curricula to poetry and music²⁵⁷. Other measures take the shape of the Week of Action by supporting Black Lives Matter at Schools²⁵⁸.

While there are federal efforts to suppress truth to protect racial capitalism and silence histories that threaten entrenched power²⁵⁹, these actions and the teacher's resistance want to create new forms of knowledge that censors cannot track or fully control. This response was also motivated by concerns about the effects of increase in political polarisation on students²⁶⁰ and including fear, discrimination and bullying in educational settings, especially for vulnerable students²⁶¹. While these measures are a form of resistance and a will to protect democratic principles, they focus on

²⁵⁴ Carrie Dann, 'Trump on ISIS Terrorists: 'You Have to Take Out Their Families'' NBC News (2 December 2015) <<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/trump-isis-terrorists-you-have-take-out-their-families-n472711>> accessed 22 June 2026.

²⁵⁵ Reid Jewett Smith, 'Teaching Trump: A Frame Analysis of Educators' Responses to 'the Trump Effect' in American Schools' (2020) 28 (144) *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 1, 14 <<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1275134.pdf>> accessed 22 June 2026.

²⁵⁶ Meira Levinson, 'How Should Educators Teach Trump?' *Education Week* (17 May 2016) <<https://www.edweek.org/education/opinion-how-should-educators-teach-trump/2016/05>> accessed 23 April 2026.

²⁵⁷ Jesse Hagopian, 'In 2025, Educators Didn't Just Endure Repression. They Built Resistance' *Truthout* (26 December 2025) <<https://truthout.org/articles/in-2025-educators-didnt-just-endure-repression-they-built-resistance/>> accessed 23 June 2026.

²⁵⁸ Black Lives Matter at School, 'Annual Week of Action' <<https://www.blacklivesmatteratschool.com/woa.html>> accessed 23 June 2026.

²⁵⁹ Jesse Hagopian, *Teach Truth: The Struggle for Antiracist Education* (Haymarket Books 2025).

²⁶⁰ John Rogers and others, *Teaching and Learning in the Age of Trump: Increasing Stress and Hostility in America's High Schools* (UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access 2017) 1, 6 <<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED580203.pdf>> accessed 23 June 2026.

²⁶¹ Reid Jewett Smith, 'Teaching Trump: A Frame Analysis of Educators' Responses to 'the Trump Effect' in American Schools' (2020) 28 (144) *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 1, 3 <<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1275134.pdf>> accessed 22 June 2026.

evading censorship rather than directly confronting it so in environments with even stricter surveillance would be a high risk for teachers.

Democracy defenders in education are also librarians. “*Libraries are... essential to the functioning of a democratic society... libraries are the great symbols of the freedom of the mind*” Franklin Roosevelt stated. Libraries provide safe spaces for public dialogue, spaces for community, to equal access to learning, to find answers to understand ourselves and pose new questions. Yet after the DEI policies developed by Trump and the banning of books, librarians (or referred to as “evil specialists”²⁶²) who didn’t follow strictly the prohibitions could be fired, criminalized and even personally threatened while reducing library aids.

This situation is described on the documentary *The Librarians* whose official poster states, “*America’s war on books is more than a war on words*”. The film is on the Krause List which targeted 850 books about race and LGBTQAI+ stories on high schools in Texas. It shows how librarians unite against groups like M4L, fight for democracy and defend the value of their work for children, teenagers and community²⁶³. Librarians argued that their resistance is their own civil rights movement (under “books save lives”) as suicidal rates on children often come from lack of community and the lack of safe spaces protecting diversity where answers on sexual orientation and Black history are found²⁶⁴. Librarians also developed initiatives like Unite Against Book Bans as a national initiative to empower readers to stand together in the fight for censorship²⁶⁵, Books Unbanned as a digital platform to access eBooks and digital resources²⁶⁶ or Right to Read Day as annual day of action²⁶⁷.

Lastly, teacher unions. Teacher unions, also known as education, labour or industrial unions, often present themselves as the collective representation of teachers in professional and workplace matters becoming concepts as “teachers” and “unions” interchangeable²⁶⁸. These unions and their local affiliates represent around 3.7 million of current and retired educators, support staff and health professionals, having around \$355 million a year, representing among the most organised

²⁶² *The Librarians* (Kim A. Snyder, K.A. Snyder Productions 2025).

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ American Library Association, ‘Unite Against Book Bans’ <<https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/>> accessed 23 June 2026.

²⁶⁶ Brooklyn Public Library, ‘Books Unbanned’ <<https://booksunbanned.com/>> accessed 23 June 2026.

²⁶⁷ American Library Association, ‘Right to Read Day – Unite Against Book Bans’ <<https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/right-to-read-day/>> accessed 23 June 2026.

²⁶⁸ Niu, ‘How do teacher unions frame professionalism discourses in contemporary socio-political contexts?’ (n 252) 288.

actors capable of pushing back Trump's administration's education policies²⁶⁹. This pushing back is especially since teachers tend to lean politically more progressive than the average voter. Evidence from the 2022 elections showed that over two-thirds of political donations made by K-12 teachers were directed to Democratic candidates while more than 90% of campaign contributions from teachers' unions also supported Democrats²⁷⁰.

Critical policy research on teachers' work has warned that neoliberal education reforms simplify the richness and complexity of teaching, while simultaneously increasing teachers' workloads through greater external oversight and accountability measures²⁷¹. But, as these neoliberal education reforms tend to view teachers and their unions as obstacles to change or as representing merely individual interests, educational policies are created to limit unions and teacher participation and their power²⁷². Plus, media is also representing unions negatively²⁷³. Consequently, now unions are looking to strengthen their public legitimacy²⁷⁴ defending that they represent the defence of a quality public education system and not just their interests.

Building on the role as an actor in education policy and resistance to neoliberal reform, unions like the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Chicago Teachers Union's (CTU) has recently achieved several legal and policy victories. As for the AFT, through litigation against the federal government, the Union has achieved a deal with the Trump Administration which secures student debt relief measures and the implementation of loan forgiveness plans²⁷⁵, although it remains challenging under the new (limiting) OBBBA policy. The AFT has also spoken up towards the withdrawal of government actions related to civil rights guidance in schools. Teacher unions have also reacted to school choice actions and have previously stopped a federal school

²⁶⁹ Sarah D. Sparks, 'How Teachers' Unions Are Confronting the Second Trump Era' *Education Week* (25 June 2025) <<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-teachers-unions-are-confronting-the-second-trump-era/2025/06>> accessed 22 June 2026.

²⁷⁰ Jay P. Greene, Educators Overwhelmingly Support Democrats, Even in Republican States (Education Freedom Institute 2024) 1, 5 <https://www.efinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/EFI-PoliticalDonations_JGreene.pdf> accessed 23 June 2026.

²⁷¹ Michael W. Apple, *Teachers and texts: A political economy of class and gender relations in education* (Routledge 2013).

²⁷² John Carr and Lori Beckett, *Teachers and teacher unions in a globalised world* (Routledge 2018) 186–194.

²⁷³ Vasileios Symeonidis and Nelly Stromquist, 'Teacher status and the role of teacher unions in the context of new professionalism' (2020) 25 (2) *Studia paedagogica* 23–45 <<https://journals.phil.muni.cz/studia-paedagogica/article/view/19174>> accessed 18 June 2026.

²⁷⁴ Peter Lilja, 'A quest for legitimacy: on the professionalization policies of Sweden's Teachers' Unions' (2014) 29 (1) *Journal of Education Policy*, 86, 100 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02680939.2013.790080>> accessed 18 June 2026.

²⁷⁵ Chantelle Lee, 'The Trump Administration to Resume Some Student Loan Forgiveness After lawsuit: What to Know' *Time* (23 October 2025) <<https://time.com/7327813/student-loan-forgiveness-trump/>> accessed 22 June 2026.

voucher proposal during the first Trump administration under Education Secretary Betsy DeVos²⁷⁶.

Adam Sanchez demonstrates how unions that fight for social causes can turn standard local contracts into legal shields against federal policy overreach and this was the case of the CTU. A signed union contract is a binding law that the city must follow where there are clauses that strictly force schools to respect transgender students' chosen names, protects teacher's freedom to teach Black history and blocks agents from entering schools without a federal judge's warrant²⁷⁷. Through this strategy, the union proved that a labour contract can be used to keep schools' safe and free from policies that go against guaranteed rights for LGTBI+ students, among others.

²⁷⁶ Sparks, 'How Teachers' Unions Are Confronting the Second Trump Era' (n 269).

²⁷⁷ Adam Sanchez, 'The Chicago Teachers Union Is Showing Us How to Fight Trump' (2025) 39 (4) *Rethinking schools* <<https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/the-chicago-teachers-union-is-showing-us-how-to-fight-trump/>> accessed 23 June 2026.

Conclusions and Future Lines of Investigation

The research presented in this thesis has been based on the questioning of the two main objectives assigned to the U.S. public system by the Department of Education: the normative narrative of the “American Dream” that defines the educational system as a neutral space of meritocracy and social mobility and, secondly, the direct historical link between education and democracy. After the analysis conducted across the three chapters using sociopolitical concepts, the main conclusion is that neither of these objectives operates in the way that it is portrayed.

The education system is not a neutral space of meritocracy but must be recognized as a field of power where structural inequalities are not overcome by the Dream but instead perpetuated and even legitimized by neoliberal policies. Bourdieu’s concepts have been useful to show how educational institutions do not distribute opportunity equally, but reward cultural, social and economic capital already possessed by dominant groups. For instance, there is no freedom to school choice or meritocracy in college access. Interventions like private school voucher programs or multidimensional higher education admissions process only operate to perpetuate social reproduction. Trump’s education agenda dismantles compensatory mechanisms, such as the Department’s counterweight or test-optional policies while leaving institutional mechanisms that safeguard elite privilege entirely untouched as it is the case for legacy admissions and donor preferences. The American Dream of mobility is only an inherited advantage presented as individual talent while exclusion remains a personal failure.

The link between education and democracy is subordinated to the Foucault’s link between knowledge and power. This latter is the one deciding what is taught protecting the dominant and the dominant narrative, hidden under the so-called institutional neutrality, while eliminating diversity policies. Other concepts from Foucault have become relevant in this argument. The institutional neutrality works under “regime of truth” as it frames CRT or LGTBI+ inclusion as ideological threatening positions and thus allow censorship and silencing of marginalized perspectives. The education system no longer has a social democratic mission but rather operates as an economic market in which students are conceived as consumers. His concept of “neoliberal governmentality” reveals how the contemporary education transforms the democratic citizen into an entrepreneur of oneself, responsible for managing their own outcome. Examples exposed of this situation have been the student loan debt or the stop-out students.

And this transformation does not require open coercion. The intervention developed though is not direct, although is recently getting more evident. Foucault's focus helps us understand how Trump's strategy functions not through coercion but through norms and discourses. For instance, Trump does not dismantle the Department of Education but weakens it by dismissing staff or changing the system of work of the OCR. So, rather than openly violating the law, the administration exploits the ambiguities and grey zones. For example, it promotes a decentralised federalism while redirecting resources in claims of neutrality and standard conditions. And, even when he openly violates the law, the desired effect is often achieved by the time a court declares the action unlawful, as it was the case for CRT.

And yet education is portrayed as the perpetuator of inequality through language and narrative. With the lens of Ernesto Laclau, concepts like "freedom," "parental rights," or "school choice" have been taken out their significance and now operate as empty signifiers where, under a logic of equivalence, right-wing populist discourse has articulated heterogeneous social demands. These concepts work opposing American families to a common antagonist: a corrupt failing educational system or a supposed "woke institutional elite". At the same time, this rearticulation absorbs democratic demands for equality and redirects them into actively serving the interests of dominant groups reinforcing the elimination of vulnerable perspectives. In other words, Trump's concern for educational quality is only present in the language but not in the actions taken that are antidemocratic.

Several lines of future research emerge from this analysis. Given that the Trump administration remains in office at the time of writing these words, peer-reviewed academic literature analysis on Trumpist educational policy effects will be developed over time. For example, it will be needed on the democratic costs set by the OBBBA. Early indicators are already concerning about the current context: over half of teachers surveyed reported that their students were experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety than in previous years, and nearly half observed direct negative effects attributable to political polarization²⁷⁸. Moreover, future research on this topic would benefit from moving beyond single-issue analysis toward multidimensional approaches that capture intersecting effects of simultaneous policy interventions. For instance, it is necessary to understand how ICE's interior enforcement operations impact students' well-being and

²⁷⁸ John Rogers and others, *Teaching and Learning in the Age of Trump* (n 260) 12.

performance. The impact must be examined while describing the dismantling of DEI programmes or book bans, since all these policies affect the same vulnerable students.

Finally, research on the forms of institutional resistance documented in this thesis is needed to understand which strategies prove most efficient to defend democracy and rights. It shouldn't be forgotten that analogous right-wing populist movements are happening elsewhere besides the United States and studying them comparatively would maybe help us extract conclusions and new approaches to the questions here asked.

As Applebaum noted, democracy must be carefully cultivated because it does not reproduce itself automatically and education becomes a politicised act since it is shaped by democratic principles and values²⁷⁹. The Trump educational discourse and actions have weakened and harmed democracy and, while doing it, it has deepened structural inequalities. Education must not be a commodity only available for a few. As Amartya Sen defended, access to quality education should not only be understood in economic terms, but a human right tied to dignity and social inclusion²⁸⁰.

²⁷⁹ Yoni Applebaum, 'Americans aren't practicing democracy anymore' The Atlantic (October 2018) <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/losing-the-democratic-habit/568336/>> accessed 27 June 2026.

²⁸⁰ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Anchor Books 1999).

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