Charter Schools and Urban Regimes in Neoliberal Context: Making Workers and New Spaces in Metropolitan Atlanta

KATHERINE B. HANKINS and DEBORAH G. MARTIN

Abstract

In this article, we demonstrate the neoliberalism and multiscalar economic perspective of the charter school movement in Atlanta, Georgia, through examination of news articles and editorials about charter schools in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution from 1998 to 2004. We posit three interrelated dynamics which explain the editorial board’s interest in charter schools as part of a broader urban regime agenda. First, charter schools represent part of a neoliberal shift in education that parallels shifts in urban governance, emphasizing flexibility, public–private partnerships, and ‘market’-oriented consumer choice and accountability. Second, the newspaper is issuing a challenge to educational structures, to adopt more neoliberal policies and shed a bureaucratic, liberal governance framework. Finally, we find critical evidence that the charter school movement draws on a multiscalar discourse which simultaneously references responsiveness to local, neighborhood needs, and at the same time highlights the economic imperatives of a global, competitive city to differentially skill students/workers in order to capture mobile and fractured (global) capital.

Introduction

As of 2006, over a million students in 40 states attend one of more than 3,500 charter schools in the United States. Charter schools are funded by taxpayers on a per-pupil basis, and yet they are independently managed by groups of parents, teachers, community activists and/or private businesses. Charter schools operate with funds from local school boards — with very general oversight — but their particular structure, from educational mission to human relations, is determined independently in each school, creating a fragmented and differentiated educational landscape within any given school district (that has charter schools).

The state of Georgia alone hosts 56 charter schools, serving over 20,000 students. Between January 1998 and December 2004, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC), Georgia’s major newspaper, published 50 staff editorials advocating charter schools as a (partial) solution to Georgia’s and Atlanta’s public education woes. This advocacy raises questions about the motivations and interests of the newspaper: why would charter schools generate such interest by the newspaper’s editorial board? What is the relationship between a new form of education and a prominent representative of a local urban regime?

Recognizing the newspaper’s role as a classic urban regime player (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Stone, 1989), we posit three interrelated dynamics which explain the

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editorial board’s interest in charter schools as part of a broader regime agenda. First, the local devolution inherent in charter schools is, we argue, part of a neoliberal shift in education that parallels shifts in urban governance, emphasizing flexibility, public–private partnerships and ‘market’-oriented consumer choice and accountability. Indeed, neoliberalism represents dramatic shifts in the scalar regulation of capital (Brenner, 2001; Jessop, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002) that include and affect local governance strategies and regimes (Brenner, 2004). Second, the newspaper is issuing a challenge to the traditional ‘education regime’ (Stone, 1998) to adopt more neoliberal policies and shed its bureaucratic, liberal governance structure. Finally, in asking how the AJC, Atlanta’s major newspaper, has covered charter schools in its region, we find critical evidence that the charter school movement draws on a multiscalar discourse which simultaneously references responsiveness to local, neighborhood needs, and at the same time highlights the economic imperatives of a global, competitive city to differentially skill students/workers in order to capture mobile and fractured (global) capital.

In this article, we demonstrate the neoliberal and multiscalar economic perspective of the charter school movement in Atlanta, Georgia, through examination of news articles and editorials about charter schools in the AJC from 1998 to 2004. Central to our argument is the hegemonic growth discourse of the urban regime (Squires, 2002 [1991]; Wilson and Wouters, 2003), in which local movements such as education reform must be examined for their intersections with events and attitudes at other scales, creating interscalar governance shifts and dynamics (Swyngedouw, 1997; Brenner, 2001). In what follows, we first situate our discussion of charter schools within the broader governance context of neoliberalism, education debates and urban regime theory. We then introduce specific editorials and news articles and describe how they advocate for neoliberal changes to educational structure and differentially skilled workers in different urban spaces. We conclude by suggesting that the charter school movement complements and interacts with urban governance in ways that reflect the political economy of metropolitan development, fostering a differentiation among future worker citizens that is inherently uneven, and in the process redefining the nature and geography of public education.

Neoliberalism and (neoliberal) education reform

Neoliberalism is an ideology that advocates market efficiencies in political, social and economic life. Rather than seeing neoliberalism as a new form of economic policy-making, Brenner and Theodore (2002) argue that it is part of an evolving globalized capitalism, with particular manifestations in specific places. Each urban place has institutional frameworks that shape the particular incorporation of neoliberalism into urban governance. As Peck and Tickell (2002) argue, neoliberalism has coincided with, and to some degree created, the urban entrepreneurialism typified by interurban competition for economic investments and privatized governance. Indeed, these two policy logics coincide and reinforce one another at a variety of spatial scales. Central

[1] We don’t wish to suggest that all challenges to traditional, state-structured education are inherently neoliberal. The meanings and implications of any change in public services or state functions are dependent on the context in which they occur. The contemporary movement towards charter schools, however, must be seen in light of broader state devolutions that celebrate market logics and a smaller state. While these movements may have progressive potential, they also easily connect with a neoliberal agenda. We see the local control that is a hallmark of charter schools as always occurring in a context of and in connection with processes at other scales (as Brenner, 2001 argued). Thus, the neoliberal imperatives at global, national and regional scales work on and intersect with local initiatives such as charter schools, making them inseparable in practice. We do not deny the possibilities for resistance, but suggest it must be deliberate and intentionally in opposition to neoliberal impulses: Opting out of the state may foster civil society solutions, but it does so at a risk of greater social exclusions.
to entrepreneurial governance, as with neoliberalism, is the primacy of the market, with the illusion of market efficiencies and consumer ‘choice’ (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

Neoliberalism has its antecedents in liberalism, an economic, political and social logic that seeks to organize society around free markets, free choice and free association (Jessop, 2002). In many cases, however, the shift to privatization under neoliberalism is initiated and managed through the state and its infrastructures, belying the ideology of a separation between state and market (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Weber, 2002; Brenner, 2004). While scholarship on neoliberalism has tended to focus on shifts in national and urban governance (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Brenner, 2004), education is another arena in which neoliberal reform has dangled a promise of, and at times actual opportunity for, increased local control over the delivery of public education. In these cases, however, ‘local control’ may be at a very small scale, such as a neighborhood, in contrast to the scale of a particular city or municipal government. Further, this localization does not separate charter schools from regional and national shifts in education delivery; but instead, functions as part of a rescaling process in education policy that shifts the locus of education policy from school boards to individual schools, rescaling the education hierarchy and serving broader neoliberalizing governance goals in the process.

Neoliberalization of education reform

Public schools’ particular function is to educate children equally, regardless of their means. The provision of schools and public education in democratic societies has been linked to the very formation of the democratic nation-state through the teaching of citizenship and the construction of citizens (Dewey, 1924; Greene, 1988 in Mitchell, 2002). The role of public education in creating citizens has been reconsidered in light of both supranational and highly local dynamics. For example, as Mitchell (2002) asserts, the transnational flows of people and capital has challenged the degree to which subjects are created as citizens of nation-states through public schools. To demonstrate the fragility of the relationship of schools to the construction of national citizens, she uses the case of Canadian immigrants from Hong Kong and their struggle to create schools to promote global citizenship rather than national citizenship. Likewise, Laurie et al. (2003) examine the role of education in producing particular kinds of ethnic identities within a nation-state. Against the backdrop of transnational, neoliberal policies, they examine the role of higher education in producing ethnic subjects in Latin America and the educational spaces that are available for ‘indigenous professionalization’. These studies demonstrate the importance of educational institutions in constructing and challenging the formation of both national and transnational subjects. However, neoliberal educational policies — because of their fragmentation and localization — also produce subjects, constituted not as citizens but as workers, at the metropolitan or neighborhood scale. The role that these local subjects play in the urban political economy is one warranting further examination.

Of course, neoliberal education reform does not arise from a previously egalitarian educational map. Schools have long been linked to the perpetuation of inequality among social groups (Rist, 1973; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990 [1977]). Reproduction theorists assert that the capitalist system relies on inequality in education systems to produce a working class (Apple 1995 in Clark-Ibanez, 2003). Certainly, existing inequalities around race and class have long plagued the public education system, particularly in light of the fact that public schools are funded in part by local property taxes. As Lipman (2002) argues, contemporary education reform policy has the potential to exaggerate inequalities, effectively marginalizing and regulating the identities of African-American and Latino youth. More hopeful scholars, however, see school reform as the solution to a system that produces uneven educational achievement (Finn et al., 2002).
Charter schools and neoliberal urban regimes in metropolitan Atlanta

The neoliberalization of public education is changing the institutional expression of public schools. Market-based models of choice and competition, such as alternative schools, magnet schools, school vouchers and charter schools coexist alongside traditional public schools. Educational policies, such as No child left behind, with its emphasis on allowing students of ‘failing schools’ to relocate, have complicated intra-district competition and the distribution of federal resources. Rather than uniform goals and policies — if not actual outcomes — across a district, then, schools are increasingly differentiated by intent even within a given system. This new institutional framework has important consequences for the kinds of subjects and spaces that are created by such reform. This article focuses on one new institution: the charter school.

Charter schools
As noted at the start of this article, charter schools are privately managed, publicly funded schools. Conversion charter schools are traditional public schools that elect to transition to a private (or teacher-led) management structure, whereas start-up charter schools are new schools designed and managed by community members or private corporations. Charters are granted by the state or the local school district and generally extend for a time period of one to five years. The debates over the merits of charter schools are structured around many of the same terms as debates over urban governance and entrepreneurial cities: the market–state dichotomy. This reduces the school to either fully private and based on consumer choice or fully public and based on state bureaucracy. Market language is reflected in positive references to choice, freedom and accountability, while state-based education is characterized as bureaucratic and unresponsive (Lubienski, 2001; Wells et al., 2002). Since charter schools are still taxpayer funded, Lubienski (2001) questions the meaning of ‘public’ in public education, arguing that proponents of charter schools have essentially redefined the meaning of public education away from concerns with the public good towards concerns with consumer goods. Thus, charter schools reflect the neoliberal trend of finding market-based solutions to social-service provision and offering ‘choice’ and ‘autonomy’ to parents and charter-school administrators. Indeed, like ‘privatized’ urban governance, charters still rely on state resources (tax money) to accomplish their goals.

New institutional structures such as charter schools offer a window onto the complicated neoliberal shifts happening in both public education and in urban governance, which addresses questions about the new subjects and spaces of a restructuring state. In order to situate these shifts in education policy and delivery, we need to consider the governance structure of the municipalities in which the charters function, and of the school boards themselves. Both education and urban governance create governance regimes (Stone, 1989; 1998). Examining the form of these regimes demonstrates the coexistence and connections among them at a metropolitan scale, posing the question of how the urban regime is responding to the neoliberalization of the nation-state and the subsequent rearrangement of social-service provision at the urban scale.

Situating education and urban regimes

Education regimes
Stone (1998) refers to education regimes as particular configurations of community members and policymakers who enact and support public education. Specifically, he argues that much of urban public education in the 1980s and 1990s has been dominated

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2 See Thiem (2003) for a discussion of No child left behind as a neoliberal policy.
by what he calls — drawing on Rich (1996) — an ‘employment regime’, in which ‘the protection of jobs and career ladders is often at the heart of how education politics is organized’ (Stone, 1998: 9). Indeed, Burns (2003) refers to the public school system as a ‘cartel’ in his analysis of extralocal impacts on education policy. In this formulation, charter schools represent an explicit regional and national attempt to rescale the power of education policy to a neighborhood scale, thereby wresting it from local school boards. We argue that this shift enables a more fractured and flexible approach to education that complements and enhances broader regional and national neoliberal impulses, including the neoliberalization of urban governance and urban regimes. Interest in education regimes as a window onto larger regime processes is particularly salient given national and local dialogue about education reform in the United States. From debates about the federal No child left behind law to contentious struggles over voucher programs, the internal dynamics of education regime reveals different visions of how public education should be delivered. We see the discourse about education reform, and, in particular, the emerging popularity (and controversy) over charter schools as a revealing moment in the neoliberalization of public education, one that parallels and, as we argue here, interacts in important ways with the neoliberalizing of urban governance.

Urban regimes

Urban regime theory postulates a network of interconnected policy decisionmakers within the formal political and local business spheres of particular cities (Elkin, 1987; Brown 1999; Stone, 1989). Arguing that structural theories about the dominance of business interests in local politics are insufficient for understanding how business wields influence, regime theorists demonstrate that social networks bind business leaders and politicians to one another in a socially and economically supportive and mutually reinforcing network with local economic growth as an overriding goal (Stone, 1989; 1998). Logan and Molotch’s (1987) growth machine theory illustrates the interconnected interests and actors that can comprise an urban regime: political officials, local corporate leaders, local media, arts and cultural industries, and so on.

Locationally, regimes tend to be — or historically have been — most concerned about development in and around central business districts (Stone, 1989; Boyle, 1999; Short, 1999). Regime discourses — seen in particular in city newspapers — tend to highlight how downtown developments benefit entire metropolitan regions (Wilson and Wouters, 2003), representing the urban economy as a coherent and unified entity. More broadly, however, urban regime discourses apparent in major municipal newspapers illustrate regime concerns about regional economic growth and competitiveness (Wilson and Wouters, 2003).

Regime theory has been criticized for being overly local in scope, however, and ignoring or failing to account for the degree to which local governance is situated within broader structures and regulating frameworks (Lauria, 1997; Imbroscio, 2003). Certainly cities are set within wider political and economic contexts, which shape their internal politics and priorities. Acknowledging broader structural influences of regional, national and international political economies on urban regimes does expand the scalar lens, but it does not address the underlying scalar problem of viewing urban governance as a unified city-wide process. Regime politics are not uniform across an urban area; events and actors at more localized scales, such as that of the downtown area or a neighborhood, may significantly influence regime agenda. Further, rescalings within or affecting urban regimes — such as the restructuring of education regimes — may provoke a response or cooptation by urban regimes in order to maintain a focus on the city as an economically competitive node in a global hierarchy.

Urban politics reflects interests at myriad scales within and operating on the city, including those at the intra-local scale such as neighborhood politics. The work of Purcell (1997) and McCann (2002), for example, illustrates that actors such as
homeowners’ associations or community development groups may influence the direction of urban policy through activism in the political arena, despite being outside of — and at a more micro scale than — the formal urban regime. While McCann (2002) and Purcell (1997) find that community activists can influence regime policies, our examination of Atlanta’s major newspaper demonstrates how the regime itself — or important players within it — may focus at scales simultaneously broader and smaller than the metropolitan region in order to advocate for particular governance structures and economic competitiveness. As regulation theorists argue (Lauria, 1997; Imbroscio, 2003), regimes may need to respond to or advocate for policy at subnational or national scales. At the same time, however, regime interests in particular subdistricts or on micro-scale dynamics within an urban arena may be manifest (such as through support for charter schools) in ways that seek to capitalize on a fragmented urban economy.

The interest taken by the AJC in urban education also draws attention to Brown’s call for conceptualizing the regime beyond a market-state framework (1999). Urban education — and its transformation through reforms such as charter schools — involves a traditional public sphere which is separate from the municipal government, plus a new host of actors that are quasi-public but also private (including parents) involved in intersecting arenas of communal, public and domestic spheres at neighborhood-based or similarly local scales. By analyzing these interconnected spheres in terms of regime politics, we draw upon the suggestion of Brown (1999: 77) to recast regime theory into a multidimensional analysis of governance, highlighting the struggle over rescaling processes in education and urban regimes.

Methodology

We analyze the newspaper coverage of charter schools in the AJC, focusing on how charter schools are portrayed in the staff editorials and in news reports. We engage in qualitative content analysis, where we examine the topics covered and the tone of newspaper articles to ascertain whether the newspaper is advocating a position with regard to charter schools or rather simply ‘reporting’ on charter school activities.

We analyzed the newspaper coverage of the AJC, which as of 2002 had a circulation of approximately 1.3 million readers in metro-Atlanta during the week and approximately 1.9 million on weekends (Reader profile, 2002). We chose the AJC to examine because of its extensive readership in Atlanta (which is approximately 40% of adult readers in the metro-area during the week), and because it is the only major newspaper based in Atlanta.

We gathered several types of data in our analysis. To answer how the AJC has represented and reported on the charter-school movement as a whole, we used Lexis Nexis to gather two types of data. First, 50 editorials written between January 1998 and December 2004 by the AJC staff reveal the explicit position of the newspaper with regard to charter schools. Second, to supplement the editorials and to see how the newspaper represented charter schools, we broadened our search to include general articles in the AJC written about charter schools. We narrowed in on a more recent two-year time frame and found 126 substantive articles (reports about charter school activities, struggles different communities had in starting charter schools, and decisions local

3 See Hankins (2005) for a discussion of the different actors involved in charter schools and the impacts of such educational reform on new forms of citizenship practice.

4 The Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution merged into the Atlanta Journal-Constitution on 5 November 2001. Before that, the Atlanta Constitution was published in the morning and the Atlanta Journal in the evening.
school boards faced in granting charters) from January 2002 to December 2004.\(^5\) We compiled a database of the articles, and designated whether they were supportive, neutral, or negative with regard to charter schools. Supportive articles were those that predominantly emphasized the positive elements of charter schools; neutral articles provided relatively value-free reporting about charter schools; and negative articles were those that primarily highlighted the failings or shortcomings of the schools.

Furthermore, beyond the broad characterization of the tone of the articles, we identified particular discursive trends in the ways that charter schools were discussed. To do so, we categorized articles by general topic and tone, including (as we detail below) explanations of charter schools, advocacy around enabling legislation, and descriptions of struggles to establish charter schools. In what follows, we draw out the neoliberal language that the newspaper reporters and editorialists consistently used to describe charter schools. We highlight the strategic moves the newspaper made with its use of language to challenge the traditional education regime to shed its bureaucratic state role and to become more like the private sector. We assess complex scalar shifts in the newspaper coverage: advocacy for charter schools to be locally controlled (at the neighborhood scale, for example) as a way to make the entire state more competitive and to reign in global capital. Finally, we analyze articles that explicitly discuss the curricula that charter schools have employed and find a celebration of the geographically differentiated workers that charter schools have the potential to produce.

The AJC’s advocacy of charter schools

In 1993 the Georgia General Assembly passed a law allowing conversion charter schools, or charters for existing traditional public schools. In 1998, the law was amended to allow local school boards to charter start-up schools, which are created by community groups, parents and/or private corporations.\(^6\) Since then, the AJC has reported on the movement at the state level and at the level of local school districts.

The majority of the charter school coverage in the AJC was positive. In the analysis of substantive articles about charter schools, we categorized 74 of 126 as supportive of charter schools, 22 as neutral, 23 as mixed in tone and 6 as negative. Almost 60% of the articles, then, were supportive of charter schools, and all of the 50 editorials were supportive.\(^7\) In these articles and in the editorials, the promise of freedom and the market characterize the portrayal of charter schools. Also within this neoliberal language is a challenge to traditional public education — or educrats — to become more like the flexible and accountable private sector. Finally, we see the simultaneous scaling down and scaling up — or, simply, a rescaling (Brenner, 2004) — of the urban regime: the newspaper is advocating for charter schools as a means for the entire state of Georgia to become more economically competitive and at the same time, as a salve for economically disadvantaged pockets of the metropolitan region, especially the inner city.

The first and most obvious way that coverage was positive was in the neoliberal themes that resonated in the language that reporters used to define charter schools. In

\(^5\) There were 389 total ‘substantive’ (non-editorial) articles returned by Lexis Nexis for the period 2002-2004; the 263 that we did not analyze were short ‘education notebook’ segments that reported events at different schools.

\(^6\) Georgia followed other states in passing charter school laws. Minnesota was the first state to allow charter schools in 1991, and California followed in 1992. By the mid-1990s, nearly half of the states allowed charters, and by 2003, 40 states had signed charter-school legislation (Overview of charter schools, 2004).

\(^7\) Many of the negative articles reported on the problems at the Academy of Lithonia, a charter school managed by a private corporation that was under suspicion of mismanaging funds (Carter, 2002: 1D). The Academy of Lithonia closed in 2004, after its local school board refused to renew its charter.
what we call the ‘charter school explanation’, writers provided a brief description of charter schools in the AJC articles. These explanations generally highlighted elements of choice and freedom, innovation, accountability, and compared it to the bureaucracy of traditional public education. This brief explanation is fundamental in establishing the tone for each article, for implicit in most of the descriptions is a celebration of the charter school movement.

A typical charter school explanation includes the following: ‘Charter schools are public schools that are funded by tax dollars but freed from some rules and regulations, giving them more room to innovate’ (Donsky, 2002a: 1JN). Another explanation reads: ‘Charter schools are public schools funded by tax dollars but free of many of the restrictions that govern traditional public school’ (Carter, 2002: 1D). Likewise, in an article focusing on the creation of a charter school, the language and themes repeat: ‘Charter schools are public, receiving state and local taxpayer money. They cannot charge tuition but are freed of some rules and regulations, allowing them to try innovative programs’ (Donsky, 2002b: 1B). Independence and accountability are important themes that recurred in the charter-school explanation: ‘Charter schools are funded by taxes, but they operate separately from the school district’s central office and are held accountable through a board-approved charter’ (Donsky, 2003a: 1C), and ‘Charter schools are public schools that are run independently from school districts but are funded by taxpayers’ (Donsky, 2002c: 1JN). The independence and accountability suggests a contrast with traditional public schools, which are implicitly seen as mired in rules and regulations and not held accountable for their actions.

In these explanations, charter schools are characterized as being accountable to the public, while counter-intuitively freed from excessive public (state) oversight. We sense in these articles a message that the reader should care about charter schools because they are funded by taxpayers. The wording emphasizes the schools’ independence, but we are reminded that they are still public schools. The notion of public itself is thus subtly called into question. It is a public that needs severing from its own state — the schools are independent from the state yet funded by the state. This language and elision seems evocative of other aspects of neoliberal governance, such as the ‘private market’ solutions to urban decline that rely nonetheless on state funds (Weber, 2002).

The neoliberal language of independence and freedom from the state is evident, too, in the newspaper’s editorials written between 1998 and 2004 (see Table 1). All of these editorials in some way supported, endorsed and encouraged the public’s support of charter schools. The editorials reflect the newspaper’s explicit position in favor of charter schools, a position that redefines ‘public’ education as that which is financially supported by, but freed from rules of, the state and metropolitan education systems. In calling for schools that are taxpayer funded but regulated more flexibly, these editorials essentially are challenging education regimes at both the local and state levels to adopt neoliberal-style reform. The editorialists seek an education regime in which public money finances flexible, privately managed schools.

In several editorials, the newspaper staff vigorously defends the charter-school concept, even when national reports suggest that student performance in charter schools is flagging behind that of traditional public school students (Schemo, 2004). For example, in August 2004, the newspaper editorial staff argued that ‘even though the performance of charter-school students may not be better than students at traditional public schools, the concept of choice in public education should be protected’ (In children’s interest: AJC, 2004: 20A). The neoliberal ideology of ‘choice’ becomes more important in this analysis than actual educational outcomes. In another editorial, neoliberal ideology again is evidenced in a celebration of ‘market competition’ in education:

At work is the basic American principle of competition. Threatened by the charter movement on one side and vouchers on the other, public schools are recognizing that they have to give their customers more of what they want. And parents clearly want a range of education options for their children (Allow charter schools to provide competition: AJC, 2001: 20A).
Table 1: Headlines and excerpts from selected representational editorials in the AJC, 1998–2004

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<tr>
<td>29 December 2004 (AJC)</td>
<td>Charter schools fail to break mold</td>
<td>Too few charter schools have taken advantage of the flexibility from regulation given to them under the law . . . While charters have less money [to educate children] than public schools, they have more freedom. More of them ought to seize that freedom to rewrite manuals on public education in America and become learning laboratories.</td>
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<td>20 August 2004 (AJC)</td>
<td>In children's interest, look past numbers . . . Charter schools may not be performing miracles, but they're offering parents educational choices</td>
<td>The charter school movement is still young and the growing pains are inevitable. That charter schools haven't worked miracles doesn't mean they don't work at all.</td>
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<td>24 December 2003 (AJC)</td>
<td>Our opinions: it's dumb to snub charter schools</td>
<td>If school boards in Georgia made students their top priority, they wouldn't regard charter schools as competition. They'd see them as inspiration.</td>
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<td>7 August 2003 (AJC)</td>
<td>Our opinions: adjust system's attitude toward charter schools</td>
<td>[The Superintendent] has to make her staffers understand that their first responsibility is not preserving the school system. It's educating children, whether they sit in a traditional classroom or a charter school.</td>
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<td>4 October 2001 (Atlanta Constitution)</td>
<td>Our opinions: allow charter schools to provide competition</td>
<td>At work is the basic American principle of competition. Threatened by the charter movement on one side and vouchers on the other, public schools are recognizing that they have to give their customers more of what they want. And parents clearly want a range of education options for their children.</td>
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<td>2 November 2001 (Atlanta Constitution)</td>
<td>An editorial: prescription for public schools</td>
<td>Our belief is that what public education needs is a dramatic, market-oriented change.</td>
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<td>5 December 2000 (Atlanta Constitution)</td>
<td>Charter schools stifled if hurdles are too high</td>
<td>Certainly, no charter school should be approved that's destined to fail. Nor should the bar be set so high that grass-roots charters are doomed by the application process itself.</td>
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<td>13 September 2000 (Atlanta Constitution)</td>
<td>Charter law needs revision again</td>
<td>We really do wish the state Legislature would embrace charter schools in a bold way. Georgia should follow progressive states, such as California, Arizona, Michigan and Minnesota, that allow more than the local school board to issue charters.</td>
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In this editorial, parents and children have become consumers; the purpose of their consumption is around principles of competition. The outcome of education — student performance and the formation of citizenship — is not as important as school choice. This highlights the way the education regime is being challenged by the newspaper, a member of the urban regime, around the principles of consumerism and competition. The newspaper is arguing that the education regime needs to adopt the same market-based principles.

Indeed, due to their governance structure, which often includes parents and community members, charter schools are seen as a solution to the unresponsiveness of large school districts and their bureaucratic structures. For example, the AJC Editorial staff criticize the complexity of the state of Georgia’s legal code regarding public schools:

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<td>6 September 1999</td>
<td>Charter schools stifled in state: with power-conscious local boards deciding fate of proposals, innovative education ideas stand no chance</td>
<td>In many cases, parents, community activists and even universities have been discouraged from attempting to start a charter school because of the ridiculous number of hoops they are forced to jump through. Add to that resistance a set of guidelines issued by the Georgia School Boards Association</td>
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<td>21 June 1999</td>
<td>Charter schools deserve a chance</td>
<td>There are other examples of roadblocks being put up by local school boards fearful of relinquishing control. They prompt the question of whether the state's law giving exclusive chartering power to local school boards is adequate.</td>
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<td>21 August 1998</td>
<td>Give parents in Atlanta option of charter schools</td>
<td>What Atlanta needs is new, start-up charter schools built with community and parental support. An important change in the state's charter school law that went into effect on July 1 makes that possible. . . Throughout the country, charter schools started from scratch often do wonders for the inner city.</td>
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<td>15 May 1998</td>
<td>Parental involvement helps charter schools</td>
<td>Many educators are nervous about a profound change in the law that takes effect in July. It will require formal parent involvement in the running of the charter school. That may be some of the most exciting news to come out of the charter school concept . . . Skeptics say parents don't have a clue as to what's involved in running a school. Hogwash . . . Under this changed charter school law, charter school parents will have even more say-so than parents at traditional public schools could ever imagine. Another reason to celebrate.</td>
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Table 1 Continued
The Georgia legal code governing public schools entails 600 pages. These laws, coupled with the regulations and policies of the state and local school boards, ordain what schools teach, how they teach, how much they spend and even whom they hire.

The burgeoning charter school movement in Georgia represents a protest against this mindless central office bureaucracy (Our opinions: the woes of charter schools, AJC, 2002: 19A).

This criticism of the ‘mindless bureaucracy’ of public education in Georgia seems to be a blanket criticism of government in general. The editorial then goes on to outline the struggles that charter schools often have because of the limited state and local school district support they receive.

In these examples, the newspaper is taking on what Stone (1998) calls the ‘employment cartel’ of public education. The newspaper is challenging the traditional public school system, with its centralized hierarchy and trained educational professionals. The newspaper issues this challenge explicitly by lobbying for changes to be made to Georgia’s charter school laws to make them more responsive to highly localized groups of parents and students (or consumers). The target of such advocacy is the state legislature, with the Atlanta newspaper seeking a uniform, statewide standard and opening for more charter school reform. For example, in 1998 the AJC pressed for changes to the 1993 charter-school law, which only allowed conversion schools. The headline of the 4 March 1998 Journal editorial reads: ‘A plus for education: proposed revisions would make the state’s charter school law much stronger. The bill deserves smooth sailing through the rest of the approval process’ (Atlanta Journal, 1998a: 16A).

Once the law was amended in 1998, the newspaper immediately applauded the changes and then pressed for the possibility of the State Board of Education having the power to approve charters (rather than solely local school boards). In criticizing the 1998 law that gives school boards local control to accept or reject charter proposals, a 6 September 1999 Constitution editorial headline reads: ‘Charter schools stifled in state: with power-conscious local boards deciding fate of proposals, innovative education ideas stand no chance’ (Atlanta Constitution, 1999: 8A). Once again, the newspaper seeks statewide policies and controls, rejecting the localism of individual school districts — an ironic scalar stance, given the localism inherent in charter schools themselves, and an indicator of the rescaling — or scale-shifting — of the interests of this urban regime player.

The inter-regime competition that is a hallmark of urban regime theory is evident empirically in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution’s coverage of charter schools. The attention to the state legal framework for schools highlights a concern for economic (and policy) competition that transcends any one municipal school system. The statewide perspective allows for a dual focus on the constraints and regulations of local school districts, on the one hand, and the Georgia regional economy in which the Atlanta metropolitan area is situated, on the other. Both of these issues, despite different scalar manifestations, underlie an economic-competition framework in the AJC coverage, one that is ultimately oriented to global economic competitiveness.

Concerns about regional economic competition reappear in further debates about state regulation of charter schools. By 2001 the charter-school law was once again amended, which allowed the State Board of Education to approve charters in the event that local school districts denied them. Following the 2001 amendment, the newspaper began pressing for changes to the funding formula for charter schools. The newspaper argued that the existing law made it too difficult for charter schools to gain approval and to operate, because charter-school organizers must pay for buildings, transportation and meals for their students:

Over the past several years, we’ve appealed, we’ve begged, we’ve shared our vision for how school choice and competition can work for the benefit of parents and taxpayers . . . Several remedies are needed to get Georgia in line with other states that are embracing charter schools . . . Some suggested remedies [include] clarify[ing] the state charter law concerning funding.
This means the General Assembly must tackle the issue of making sure charter schools are funded the same way as other public schools (A sign of progress on charter schools: Atlanta Constitution, 2001: 18A).

Here we see the urban regime advocating for competition and choice, but from a framework in which charter schools are positioned as making the entire state of Georgia more competitive. Urban competition as understood in regime theory is conceptually and materially grafted onto education at the state level in these articles. The notion that Georgia must compete in education in order to be successful (presumably economically) is stated quite clearly in one editorial: ‘Georgia should follow progressive states, such as California, Arizona, Michigan and Minnesota, that allow more than the local school board to issue charters’ (Charter law needs revision again: Atlanta Constitution, 2000: 12A). In contrast with the tone of the ‘charter school explanation’ in many articles, which criticize regulations of school boards and bureaucracy generally, the newspaper in this editorial seeks a top-down, region-wide and supralocal framework for the implementation of charter schools.

While advocating for a uniform, statewide and flexible regulatory structure, the newspaper simultaneously celebrated charter schools as a local solution to education challenges. In one August 1998 Journal editorial, the newspaper explicitly recognizes the potential charter schools have to improve the ‘inner city’:

What Atlanta needs is new, start-up charter schools built with community and parental support. An important change in the state’s charter school law that went into effect on July 1 makes that possible . . . Throughout the country, charter schools started from scratch often do wonders for the inner city (Give parents in Atlanta option of charter schools: Atlanta Journal, 1998: 18A).

Here the Atlanta Journal makes a link between state policy — flexibility to create charter schools — and the small-scale, local nature of charter schools. This scalar combination points to two significant elements evident in the quoted excerpt. First, as we noted earlier, the newspaper itself had called in March 1998 for state changes to charter school laws, the first of which was passed and mentioned in the editorial as about to go into effect. In terms of the newspaper’s role as a member of an urban regime, it is important to note here that the city of Atlanta is not only the major city in Georgia, but also the state capital and the largest metropolitan area in the state and its region. Thus, the calls for state legislation and attention to education by the newspaper reflect not just an ‘urban’ regime, but a regional regime within the state and with concerns — as we have demonstrated — about inter-state economic vitality and competition. Clearly, the newspaper is a player in these discussions as well. Second, the focus on the inner city highlights a locality within the urban regime more specifically, one that would be of particular concern for city officials and elites. The dual scalar focus, on the statewide region and particular localities, signal a wide-ranging, multi-scalar perspective for urban regimes and inter-metropolitan competition for economic growth (as suggested in Brenner, 2004). More ominously for education, and more specifically for economic competition, some of the articles in the AJC explicitly rescale the urban economy into specific localities which produce particularly (and differently) skilled workers.

Producing workers
Charter schools are able to target students as future workers in ways that are explicitly separated from the traditional public education regime and connected to or representative of localized, private business needs and interests. It is in this way that they are explicitly neoliberal, and that flexibility is particularly evident in their ability to experiment with their curricula and management structure. Charter schools differentiate educational outcomes by tailoring their course offerings to train students
with specific job skills. While this is not dissimilar from a function of traditional public education (Lipman, 2002), the difference is in the degree to which, by their structure, they are flexible and separated from the state. In particular, courses can be taught by teachers who are associated with private industry and who do not have traditional teaching credentials. Furthermore, specialized curricula, such as technical training, computer skills and language arts, serve students who are in attendance zones designated by individual charter schools. Although charter schools may draw from entire school districts, they are not required to and often seek to serve much smaller geographical areas within a given district. These areas are often explicitly characterized as communities and/or neighborhoods (Hankins, 2004). Thus, their specialized curricula with relatively small attendance zones have a heightened potential to spatially differentiate students than do traditional public schools.

In our analysis of the AJC coverage of charter schools, we found many articles and editorials about specific schools and their management and curricula. These articles tended to view the job-skill orientation of the schools very positively, failing to question the differentiation of student workers that results.

The Central Education Center (CEC), a charter school in Coweta County (a county southwest of Atlanta; see Figure 1), was featured in many AJC articles for its emphasis

Figure 1 Map of Atlanta with surrounding metropolitan counties

8 In this regard, charter schools may appear to be like magnet schools, which are also schools with specialized curricula that enroll students district-wide. Two crucial differences, however, distinguish charters from magnets. First, charters are independent in management from school districts, and can hire teachers outside of the district-certified pool. Second, magnet schools are designed specifically to mitigate residential segregation within a district (Definition, 2005), and seek to draw students from across a given school district.
on fulfilling the needs of the private sector by training students to be competitive in a
 global labor market. Indeed, much of the language about the Central Education Center
 focused on creating not citizens but workers:

 Newnan — About seven years ago, the folks here saw the truth in sharp focus: if you plan to
 keep local businesses and grow them, you’d better improve the work force.

 That realization, and serious pushing from businesses, led to the successful launching of
 Coweta County’s Central Educational Center, which is so unique that educators from around
 the world have come to see it (Holsendolph, 2002: 6D).

 The article reported that the decision of Yamaha Motors to expand within Coweta
 County (where the school is located) was crucial in forming elements of the curriculum
 (Holsendolph, 2002: 6D). Former Georgia Governor Roy Barnes celebrated the Central
 Educational Center and stated that its new approach ‘is a way to train our people not
 just to compete with people across town but to compete with people in Berlin, Tokyo,
 Beijing and Hong Kong’ (Holsendolph, 2002: 6D). The idea expressed by Governor
 Barnes is that the school can help ‘win’ a competition of mobile capital by training a
 workforce in Coweta County. Global and regional inter-city economic competition is,
 of course, a prime concern, and reason for the existence of, the urban regime. It follows,
 then, that charter schools would appeal to the Atlanta newspaper in part because of their
 unique and varied curricula focusing on worker training.

 The curriculum at the Central Education Center is designed to prepare students for
 ‘rich choices of employment’ when they graduate (Holsendolph, 2002: 6D). As the AJC
 reported:

 Courses are focused but cover a lot of ground. They range from computer repair, Cisco-
certified networking and machine tool building to computer graphics and electronics.

 The technology courses are special: in effect they are designed by county businesses, so they
 prepare students for jobs here and now, and many of them are taught by teachers with business
 and technology experience.

 ‘Our students learn the needs of modern manufacturing,’ said Livingston [a teacher]. ‘We learn
 how to write proposals and make things happen. Regular high schools teach by rote, through
 tunnel vision; here we learn how things work, how one thing depends on another’
 (Holsendolph, 2002: 6D).

 The article, which is 1,323 words long in the Business section of the newspaper,
 celebrates the kinds of job training that the Newnan charter school offers. It also
 highlights the mission of the Central Education Center, which is to train students to
 become skilled workers for local area businesses, in contrast to goals of traditional public
 schools. Furthermore, the article reports on the fact that some teaching certification
 requirements are waived so that students can be taught by actual industry experts.

 Not only are students taught by instructors from fields such as manufacturing,
 computer networking, and the movie industry, but they are given actual business
 assignments:

 Kevin Pullen, county teacher of the year in 2001, is an instructor in video and graphics.

 Much of the learning in his class is with business partners outside the school that want certain
 assignments done, Pullen said.

 I’d like to sit around and say, ‘This is a camera, and this is a . . .’ but the reality is, I usually
 say, ‘Get ready, we have a project to complete in two weeks!’ (Holsendolph, 2002: 6D).

 Thus, not only are videographers being trained in Coweta County, but students are
 performing as (apparently unpaid) workers before they receive their high school
 diplomas.
A year and a half later, the Central Educational Center was reported as being a potential savior to Georgia’s once-thriving movie industry:

Some Coweta County charter school programs would move to a Senoia movie studio under a $4.75 million, 20-year lease proposal being considered by Gov. Sonny Perdue.

The project was devised and supported by state Sen. Mitch Seabaugh (R-Sharpsburg), the Central Educational Center in Newnan and the owners of Riverwood Studios.

The objective is to educate students in the motion picture trades while boosting Georgia’s struggling film industry, Seabaugh said. CEC’s construction, welding and video production programs would move from Newnan to Riverwood under the proposal.

The Riverwood/CEC proposal is one of many ideas being explored to bring more film projects to the state. Georgia was one of the top movie locales in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

But other states, plus Canada, Australia and South Africa, now offer financial incentives, taking business from Georgia, said Greg Tolle, director of the Georgia Film, Video and Music Office (Carter, 2003a: 1JM).

In this article, a proposal to move part of the school to an actual studio is seen as a way to bring the students closer to the needs of the movie industry. Furthermore, the article reports that the school will help Georgia and even the United States to be more competitive in attracting lucrative movie contracts by training a knowledgeable workforce. The local orientation of charter school governance, therefore, is paired with and actually geared to a global economic perspective.

In summing up the ‘potential’ of the school, former governor Roy Barnes stated:

If they plan it right, students can graduate from high school on Friday and receive their two-year technical certificate the very next day . . . More importantly, they’ll be able to join the work force on Monday. That’s what I call seamless education (Seymour, 2003).

Explicitly, then, the purpose of education, according to the former governor, is to train workers. There is little attention to or concern about whether students should have a more diverse education, learning skills in a variety of fields, or even skills that would stand them in good stead for, possibly, higher education. In a 2004 article, the Central Education Center’s CEO reiterated the governor’s focus on worker-training:

‘We’re here to ensure that there’s a viable 21st-century work force for this community,’ said Russ Moore, the school’s CEO. ‘It’s fairly unique to have a school to have that as its mission. But this is what we’re about. We’re not about getting people to college or getting people educated in English, science and math . . . We teach academic classes here, but it’s a little bit different’ (Gutierrez, 2004: 1E).

The CEO of the school makes it very clear that the purpose of education at the Central Education Center is to create a local, trained labor force. He explicitly dismisses the goal of getting students to college. It is unclear whether this focus on jobs is supposed to appeal to parents or students, in an area where the median household income is almost US $53,000 (compared with just under US $35,000 in Atlanta); and just over 20% of the 90,000 residents have a college degree (compared with just over 34% in Atlanta). This school is designed to produce workers in a growing suburban county in the metro region,9 and from the tone of the news coverage, it is clearly expected to appeal to a broader population concerned about the economic competitiveness of the Atlanta region.

Although Coweta County’s Central Education Center was heralded as the southwest county’s answer to a trained technical workforce for Yamaha motors and for the movie industry, other schools in the metro area were also featured for their unique curricula

9 As of the 1990 census, there were just under 54,000 residents in Coweta County. The county grew by more than 60% in 10 years.
and professional training programs. For example, a proposed school in Fayette County, another rapidly growing suburban county where the average household income is just over US $71,000 with over 36% of residents having a bachelor’s degree, would allow high school students to ‘participate in a Cisco Networking Academy — a four semester program that gives students a basic foundation in computer networking’ (Carter, 2003b: 1JN).10 In Rockdale County, a growing eastern suburban county, organizers proposed a career-technical high school to ‘provide flexibility in classroom size and allow people who work in industry to teach classes since teacher certification requirements would be waived’ (Lewis, 2002: 5D). Here the concern is with having the teachers come directly from industry (or without being bothered by teaching certification) in an effort to have more of a direct relationship between students and their technical training. These schools are proposed or existing charter schools offering technical training in some of metro-Atlanta’s fastest growing counties. The growth of the areas may be attracting employers, but as the excerpts from the Coweta school indicate, those employers struggle to find qualified employees. Charter schools, according to the AJC news coverage, can fill the gap by concentrating on job preparedness as their educational mission.

Not all of the technical high schools are in the suburbs, however. Another charter school, the School for Integrated Academics and Technologies, or SIATech, is located in a predominantly African-American part of southwest Atlanta. SIATech is associated with Atlanta’s Job Corps and has an explicit focus of training students for work: ‘Students don’t sit at desks in rows facing a teacher. Rather they sit at computer work stations and cover material at their own pace, using interactive computer tutorials’. The curriculum is project-based, where ‘students are expected to “create” a business and write a business plan, using their math skills’ (Donsky, 2002d: 1JN). At SIATech, the explicit goals are job training and high-school graduation.

With all of these charter schools, the emphasis for students is on learning technical skills so that they may participate in the labor force following high school graduation. Furthermore, these schools in particular places in metro-Atlanta represent an uneven landscape of technical training. Indeed, this uneven landscape constitutes technically skilled worker-students across the metropolitan economy, aimed at national and global competitiveness.

Several charter schools focus on specific geographic and socioeconomic groups more openly than the subtle allocation of parts of the metropolitan area to technical work. KIPP, Knowledge is Power Program, a national non-profit education corporation, opens schools in inner-city neighborhoods, and holds longer school days, meetings on Saturdays, and features a ‘no frills’ curriculum (Donsky, 2003b: 1JN). Metro Atlanta has three elementary KIPP academies, which are in predominantly African-American areas of the city. Likewise, the Academy of America, in conjunction with Charter School Administrative Services (CSAS), a for-profit educational corporation, operated or proposed several schools in metro-Atlanta. The Academy of America/CSAS schools ‘target minority students with a curriculum designed to train them to be entrepreneurs and business leaders, although students of any race can enroll’ (Carter, 2002: 1D). Another article described the entrepreneurial focus of Academy of Lithonia, one of Academy of America/CSAS’s charter schools, where ‘students created individual business plans and had a fair at which they sold their products. They currently are working as a group on class businesses’ (Sansbury, 2002). At this school, traditionally underserved students are trained to become entrepreneurs.

Other charter schools that target more advantaged students focused on cultural or ethnic curricula for professional and even international jobs. For example, in a 26 January 2004 article, the newspaper reported on the focus of Amana Academy, a charter school opening in a wealthy area of Atlanta. The school’s charter includes mandatory Arabic language classes for students:

10 Cisco Systems is a corporation that provides networking capabilities for businesses.
Arabic is considered one of the most difficult languages for English speakers to learn, but it is increasingly essential for national security and global awareness, said Elizabeth Webb, the state’s coordinator for foreign language education . . . If you want the level of proficiency the government wants for translators, it’s not going to happen in four years of college (Macdonald, 2004: 1D).

At Amana Academy the worker being trained is for the US government for national security and trade, getting skills that cannot be achieved in college. Yet clearly, college is part of the goals and ambition for this charter school’s students, and the curriculum is designed to give them more skills than the average college student even before they get there.

These examples represent ways in which the AJC has reported on the kinds of curricula that charter schools can offer. Not only can students take a variety of classes that may not be offered at traditional public schools, but they are, in a sense, groomed to be particularly skilled workers — whether in the high-tech sector, as business entrepreneurs, or as language translators. From a regime perspective, these represent a variety of different kinds of niches for capital investment in metropolitan Atlanta. Furthermore, we can see the coverage of charter schools as a kind of regime ‘wish list’ of how to make or keep Atlanta competitive in the global economy: computer technology, culture industry and global language skills. As an institution that is dependent on the continuing economic vitality of the region, it is in the newspaper’s interest to support the training of a differentiated workforce in metropolitan Atlanta. Charter schools, then, by extension provide the city, and the entire state of Georgia, with a more competitive pool of workers to reign in mobile capital.

Conclusions

At the outset of this article, we questioned the motivations of the AJC and the manner in which it has consistently and repeatedly advocated for charter schools. We have argued that, in its coverage, the newspaper functions as part of an urban regime, and takes interest in charter schools as part of a broader shift towards neoliberal governance. The newspaper, a private and locally dependent actor in the metropolitan Atlanta economy, has clear interests in promoting a viable workforce for the region. To this end, the newspaper has challenged the traditional public education system to (neo)liberalize by endorsing and supporting charter schools, which are themselves quasi-private institutions. This move essentially shifts a traditional state role (providing public education) towards the private or market-based sector. Despite the potential for progressive curricula and educational missions in charter schools, the structural reorganization of public education around ‘choice’ and privatization is not a neutral shift, but one with a decidedly ideological bent.

The newspaper’s interest in charter schools has also revealed the multi-scaled reach of the neoliberalizing urban regime. The newspaper extended its advocacy of charter schools to broader scales, as part of a claim of making the region, the state, and even the country, more competitive in a global marketplace. Thus, its editorial pages in particular targeted state legislators for policy changes in education. At the same time, however, the newspaper advocated the highly local control the schools have. In highlighting the localism of charter schools, the AJC celebrated their flexibility in meeting needs of particular neighborhoods and student populations. Both of these aspects of charter schools reflect the neoliberal ‘competition and consumption’ themes of the newspaper’s coverage.

Finally, crucial to the neoliberal shift in the urban regime and its challenge to education is the production of certain kinds of workers. As one player in a broad and multifaceted urban regime, the AJC has a basic interest in maintaining its own consumer base by fostering a vibrant local (or regional) economy. By encouraging charter schools,
which can turn away from the classic mission of public education — creating citizens — to train a local workforce, the newspaper is aligning its success with a particular model of economic growth in the region. By highlighting the particular technical and academic programs of various charter schools, the newspaper demonstrates a region-wide attentiveness to Atlanta’s global economic competitiveness, despite the unique and supposed local focus of each individual school. The multi-scalar orientation of celebrating localism while being attentive to the imperatives of a global economy reflects the multidimensionality of neoliberal governance, as it operates at and through multi-scalar processes (Brenner, 2001). Clearly, the neoliberal urban regime of Atlanta, reflected in its dominant newspaper, has an interest in supporting a differently skilled workforce that can localize and capture fleeting global capital.

Katherine B. Hankins (khankins@uga.edu), Department of Geosciences, Georgia State University, 33 Gilmer Street SE, PO Box 4105, Atlanta, GA 30302-4105, USA and Deborah G. Martin (demartin@clarku.edu), Department of Geography, Clark University, Worcester, MA 01610, USA.

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Résumé
Cet article démontre la perspective économique multiscalaire et le néolibéralisme intrinsèque du mouvement des Charter Schools à Atlanta (Géorgie), en partant d’une analyse d’articles et d’éditoriaux consacrés à ces établissements dans le Atlanta Journal-Constitution entre 1998 et 2004. Trois dynamiques étroitement liées viennent expliquer l’intérêt de la rédaction pour ces écoles dans un cadre de préoccupation plus large propre au régime urbain. D’abord, les Charter Schools s’inscrivent dans une évolution néolibérale de l’éducation qui s’aligne avec les changements de gouvernance urbaine, mettant en avant la flexibilité, les partenariats public-privé, ainsi qu’un choix de clientèle et une responsabilité orientés ‘marché’. Ensuite, le journal lance aux structures éducatives le défi d’adopter davantage de stratégies néolibérales tout en se débarrassant d’un cadre de gouvernance libéral et bureaucratique. Enfin, il est démontré que le mouvement des Charter Schools puise dans un discours multiscalaire qui renvoie simultanément à une réactivité aux besoins locaux des quartiers et aux impératifs économiques d’une ville planétaire compétitive qui veut fournir aux étudiants ou employés des compétences différenciées afin de capter un capital (mondial) mobile et fragmenté.