



The Alternatives Project

The Alternatives Project Statement

Education Justice for Societal Transformation: A Framework for Action

We, the undersigned, believe that current social, economic, political, and educational arrangements reproduce relations of power that engineer profound inequities and will ultimately threaten life on the planet. We stand for alternative pedagogies and for just, regenerative education systems that will support the social transformations we need in order to create a richer, more equitable, and sustainable world.

Co-existing and inter-related global crises are pushing humanity and the living planet towards political, social, economic, and ecological collapse. These crises – currently seen in the worldwide coronavirus pandemic, structural inequalities, police brutality and racism, entrenched patriarchy, accelerating climate chaos, and the constant threat of wars – are driven globally by capitalism and militarism. We must seize this unique historical moment to reconceive and radically change public education as an entry point for deeper transformations that will build human solidarity and cooperation and bring an end to racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. We reject the notion that education's priority is to build 'human capital'; we assert that education's priorities should include regenerative ecosystems and further social justice for current and future generations. This requires the creation of just education systems, which we can only achieve as a part of a broader struggle for social transformation in all other spheres, especially the economy and in politics.

Progressive struggles are necessary to form new social contracts that serve the collective interests of the many rather than the self-interests of the few. Human history reflects a series of complex and interlinked social transitions shaped by power relations: from agrarianism to industrialization, through colonial conquest, authoritarian dictatorships, post colonialism, neoliberal globalization, and the digital revolutions and collusion between surveillance capitalism and the national security state we see today. Each new dominant class produces an ideology that perpetuates its domination, justifies the inequalities it invariably creates, and fosters pessimism that change is possible at all. These ideological hegemonies almost always involve adherence to, and create education systems that reinforce, hierarchical assumptions and rigid binary conceptions – human/non-human, male/female, mind/body,

secular/spiritual, superior/inferior, urban/rural, us/them – that assume the right of conquest and to exploit the natural world and all living species. The contemporary authoritarian, nativist, patriarchal, and settler-colonial populisms emerging worldwide in the wake of globalization and the increased migrations due to conflict and climate change sharpen these binary oppositions and provoke social insecurities to tighten their grip.

Today, education systems around the world are forged in the mindset of neoliberal capitalism and ideas of efficiency, rate of return, choice, competition, and economic growth. This ideology affords wealthy supranational corporations and billionaires unbridled power to reshape the global economy and national political systems, perpetuating extractive, carbon-based, economic activity and resulting in unconstrained consumption and the critical degradation of ecosystems. Organized in this way, education systems serve to reinforce and legitimize social inequality, segregation, and stratification within and across nations. Yet, as much as it reflects prevailing hegemonies, education is also a pivotal site of contestation. Authoritarian states, knowing full well that education can be a force for transformation, move swiftly to wield it as a tool for ensuring compliance and control.

Consequently, for many children and young people, this world is bleak. The quality of education that they receive is increasingly segmented by the socio-economic status and geographic location of their families. Education is increasingly organized in competitive markets that create and entrench race, class, and gender inequities where private providers and contractors, as well as teachers and students compete by, and are ranked on, cost efficiency and standardized tests: a commodified education model delivered via constrained public budgets, focusing on outcome benchmarks, human capital formation, and economic rate of return and value-for-money. This model reinforces human exceptionalism, racial prejudice and white supremacy, denigration of difference, legitimization of economic and political inequalities, hyper-individualism, unbridled economic growth, an uncritical reception of advertising rhetoric and compliance with authoritarian rule. One consequence is the bizarre contradiction that the most widely educated population in human history is collectively triggering the eco-collapse of the living planet's systems, an act of collective suicide and ecocide.

Over the last thirty years, sustained advocacy by civil society and education unions moved the world to embrace the right to education and the aspiration of Education For All: compulsory schooling has expanded to unprecedented levels of scale – engaging nearly two billion children each day. Most families now assume that completing 8 to 12 years of schooling is essential for the future of their children and most governments assume that providing free public education to all children and youth is sound public policy. But we are nowhere near achieving this. In part, wider structural injustices caused by the past four decades of market fundamentalism have driven sustained social-sector underspending and disarmed all government activity as

“ineffectual” and “wasteful.” Consequently, the financing of education has been woefully inadequate, and much more funding is required and is possible, from national governments as well as bilateral and multilateral international organizations.

It’s not that there is no money; governments always find money to spend on the military, the police, security and surveillance, and corporate welfare. To confront this ideology, we must expose scarcity as a myth and austerity as a deliberate policy choice to drive the agenda for neoliberal privatization. While spending targets on education reflect a global consensus, most governments do not even meet the target of spending 20% of their budgets and 6% of their GDP on education. The international community has promised for decades to spend 0.7% of their GDP on Official Development Assistance, yet allocates only a fraction of this. And all of these targets greatly underestimate the need.

We need to win these arguments in the public sphere. The problem goes beyond funding. International financial institutions -- such as the IMF and the World Bank -- are neocolonial institutions promoting neoliberal, so-called Washington Consensus policies throughout the world. The IMF and the World Bank have had a major role in influencing education (and other social) policy. Instead of supporting education, the IMF actually restricts country spending on hiring teachers and other public sector workers. The World Bank pretends to be a research-based source of objective advice, but for the last four decades has based its recommendations on its neoliberal ideology. It is high time for a new Bretton Woods conference to consider a major overhaul of the IMF and the Bank.

We call for radical change. All governments must establish free public education from early childhood through higher education that will enable a critical, participatory, democratic reevaluation of how we think and act together in the world. To deliver education as a human right requires fully funded public systems, sustainably financed through national and global progressive, redistributive tax systems, with unconditional assistance from the international community. The curriculum should actively reject the docile consumer complicity that feeds global warming and climate catastrophe. Rooted in the community, education must be culturally relevant and promote humanistic values of anti-racism, anti-sexism, solidarity, social cohesion, empathy, imagination, creativity, personal fulfillment, peace, eco-minded stewardship, and strengthening of democracy. Teachers need professional autonomy, quality working conditions, and, through unions and other organizations, a major voice in policy-making. Likewise, students and their representative organizations must also have a voice in political and pedagogical decision making, having their right to participation fully acknowledged.

The world needs a radical revisioning of education that will help to transform and create regenerative societies. This will require a new social contract that values social spending above military and security spending and goes beyond the narrow interests of the business sector,

Edtech firms, private school chains, and other edu-business actors. We call for reversing the movement towards the privatization of education and other social services and keeping business logic out of education and social policymaking. We instead draw on struggles and lessons from organised students and teachers, the trade union movement as a whole, democratic community-based organisations - including associations of minorities, migrants and refugees - as well as independent media, organisations, and professionals that share our commitment to advancing justice in the flawed, real societies in which we live. These groups have already developed alternatives for educational justice, including schools and non-formal education programs that support 21st century socialist, indigenous and black sovereignty, decolonialism, Black Lives Matter, abolitionist, and critical pedagogies.

Justice in education depends on advancing justice-related goals in four areas:

1. *Social justice – Building education for equity, transformation, and regenerative living*

Education systems need to reorient towards addressing the inequalities and injustices in their societies, fostering racial, gender, and disability justice, and models of inclusion that will teach how to work collectively and drive the transformation of education and society.

2. *Climate justice – Learning how we can live regeneratively on the planet*

We need a Global Green New Deal and public education systems that teach human ecology and stewardship values that will facilitate this transformation both now and in the future.

3. *Economic justice – Financing education and other public services in a transformed economy*

The economic system must satisfy the real needs of all people by focusing on equity and opportunity, not profit. This pandemic must mark a fundamental shift away from capitalism and towards workplacedemocracy and a radically redistributive economy that prioritizes progressive tax and progressive spending on public services for all, nationally and globally.

4. *Political justice – Reframing political engagement at all levels*

We need to move away from authoritarianism and xenophobic nationalism. We must energize global solidarity, cultivate international cooperation, and strengthen global intersectional grassroots movements. We need to develop more inclusive and participatory democracies at local, national, and global levels.

These initial ideas do not point to a distant, utopian mirage; rather they build upon the thoughts and actions of many progressive groups and organizations around the world. We, the undersigned, see these ideas for a radical re-envisioning of education and society as necessary directions to counter and overcome the severe crises the planet is facing.