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INTERVIEW WITH LOIS WEINER: DANGERS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

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In this interview Abby C. Emerson talks with Lois Weiner about her views on today's politically dangerous teaching climate. Their conversation spans unions, teacher education, teachers' work, Project 2025, privatization in education, COVID, and technology. Weiner is uniquely qualified to comment on these topics. She is a Professor Emerita of Education at New Jersey City University and currently works as an independent researcher and author. Her scholarship focuses on social justice in urban education, teacher preparation, and the democratization of teachers' unions to strengthen public education. Recently, her research has examined the growing influence of educational technology in schools and its ties to broader economic and political power structures. Grounded in a lifelong commitment to activism, her work is shaped by her experiences as a teacher and professor. She regularly contributes to publications such as Truthout, New Politics, and Jacobin. Here, she compellingly threads together seemingly separate issues, noting how they are interrelated and essential to the current issues of public education. Weiner offers important implications for teachers and researchers looking to disrupt the status quo. This interview was a longer conversation that was edited for readability. It occurred in August 2024 before the political landscape changed so rapidly after Trump's election. A few edits have been added below to reflect that.

ABBY: *Thank you for sitting down with me. Summer is winding down and the 2024 election is fast approaching! You have long been a leading voice in the field of teachers' work and teachers' unions. In today's political climate, the work of teachers is incredibly complicated. From book bans, political leaders espousing un-democratic ideals, to Right-wing challenges to schools nationwide, teachers are navigating a very complex situation. What do you find yourself wanting to say to today's teachers?*

LOIS: When I was a teacher educator I once worked with a classroom teacher who was in a very challenging workplace situation where her beliefs about teaching did not line up with those of the school. At that time, I pointed out to her it's not just about her as an individual. People face circumstances that they can't transcend, and the moral question for us as educators and for teachers is: "What are we going to demand of the school in terms of supporting the students and supporting *us* in helping them to succeed? What's our moral responsibility here?"

The problem with what goes on in schools and our unions is that there's little space for people to have conversations about today's complex challenges. And that space has to be created. To me, that's a role for teachers unions because you cannot separate your pedagogical and your

moral responsibilities from your teaching conditions. You have to address it explicitly, and that means the union needs to be vigorous, proactive, a union that makes workers feel like they're being defended, and gives them hope. We need educators who understand pedagogy and understand being active in the union, and doing both is a very, very, very hard ask of working teachers and of working teacher educators.

I once led a workshop as a PD for a large teachers union in New Jersey, which came at a time of great despair for teachers about their working conditions, and was scheduled by happenstance right after teachers had voted *overwhelmingly* to strike. We had this spectacular and honest discussion about what would have to change in the school in order for it not to be boring, for both students and teachers. The strike vote opened up the territory for a really thoughtful discussion. I realized how those of us helping teachers and administrators are trapped too by implicit acceptance of the status quo.

The strike vote altered people's consciousness, as struggle often does. The experience reinforced my understanding that to change what goes on in the schools, we really *do* need to democratize the unions to create space for honest conversations about what life in the classroom is like for everybody. The school districts can't sponsor these discussions because they're the boss and our administrators are often in an adversarial role with teachers. So, administration can be an ally, but the administration can't create the conversations we need. Teachers have to do it, by reaching out to the community and understanding what's going on in the schools from their point of view as well as our own, and moving away from that deficit view that blames parents, community, on the one hand or teachers, on the other. To encourage teachers to have these kinds of conversations with the union's help requires massive political education.

What I'm asking for is essential in this political moment, as many feel powerless and paralyzed, as we watch Trump, the GOP, and the wealthiest, most powerful elements of capital move to steal what we have won in decades of struggle: economic programs, our civil rights, control of our schools, and our children's futures.

ABBY: Last year was my first year as teacher education faculty working with undergraduates who are majoring in elementary education. One thing that I've been working through is how to work with teachers – be it preservice teachers, new teachers, or busy teachers – who might hold a narrow vision of teaching as these beautiful little read aloud moments where all the kids are silently listening to you. Yet, we know that teaching and especially teaching today is more challenging and more complicated than that. I wonder how to get them to take that first step to talk honestly and openly about the socio-political context we're in. And not only talk about it, but understand how it is connected to their jobs as teachers. What does political education look like for people that haven't really thought about teaching as a political project?

LOIS: Before I discuss this, I want to point out that we are in a pivotal political movement, and we must shift our vision and our work to encompass the larger context. We are in the grip of an international resurgence of the Right. And that will not be defeated by what we do in our classrooms alone. As teacher educators we need to be part of campaigns in our local, state, and national organizations, in alliance with allies for social justice and democratic schools to fight in a highly strategic way for what we should preserve. Resistance I've seen so far has accepted the "neoliberalized" status quo, acceptance of standardized tests to control what is taught and how, and the collection of data in that process.

This new, frightening context gives an urgency to rooting teacher education programs in social foundations, taught critically, to help prospective teachers understand the social, political, and economic conditions which they face in schools. Unfortunately social foundations as a field of study has been struck from most programs. But there's a way, even in a pedagogy or methods class, that you can introduce that content. An article that I always used in my undergraduate courses was by Jean Anyon called Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work. It's old,

but it's still relevant and had a palpable impact on the students, many of whom had been underprepared to tackle challenging readings.

ABBY: *Yes, I know the one.*

LOIS: Anyon categorizes the schools.

ABBY: *Yes, four different ones: working class schools, middle class schools, affluent professional schools, and executive elite schools.*

LOIS: And then my assignment was this, Abby. It was always, "I want you to read this article. It's going to have some language in there that is going to be hard for you. Just go beyond that language, because this is what I want you to think about when you're done reading the article. This is the guide question: which of these schools most describes the school that you went to? Why? How are they alike? Think, and how are they different?" Just that.

So you're laying out the big picture in terms of their education. You're introducing them to looking critically at their own education. That's how it starts out. And then that discussion is accompanied by the big question that we should be asking everybody to think about, what is your role as a teacher today? We directly face the challenge of whether schools should reproduce inequality or whether they should disrupt it. Where do you situate yourself as a teacher? Every single thing that we do in the class, *everything* we do in the class goes to that question. We must grapple with that question in whatever we read. How is this lesson or this curriculum reproducing or disrupting inequality? And what are the inequalities? What are the inequalities we see? Who are our allies if we decide as educators must resist what is occurring in our society and schools?

ABBY: *Yeah, hmm, that's helpful. I think that's one of the things I'm always trying to weave in.*

LOIS: I think it has to *start* with that understanding of our positionality, not just added in. Further, in that discussion is always acknowledgement of the conditions under which teachers work and students learn. In most schools now you're handed this curriculum over which you have no voice. Increasingly it's scripted and tied to testing. It's understandable if you want to shut your door, try to create a little quiet space with kids who are going to sit on the rug. But aside from whether you're permitted to do that by the administration (or federal government), what if you have kids who don't want to sit on the rug? What is your role in that situation?

ABBY: *When I entered the teaching profession in 2010, there was a hiring freeze in New York City's public schools and I went to work in charter schools for a few years. That was also the year when Waiting for Superman came out criticizing public education. The privatization conversations of the early 2010s were sharply focused on charter schools. Obviously that shifted in different ways over the last 15 years, but I'm curious what your thoughts and concerns are regarding privatization of public education today?*

LOIS: I'm really glad you asked that question. I think that was the initial neoliberal project. And it has been, in great part, successful. There are several states where a majority of the schools are charter schools. And it looks like vouchers are going to be passed in new forms, the Educational Savings Accounts, perhaps tied to data collection. Even in places where there aren't vouchers, policies have been passed to have funding follow the student. School districts are already being robbed of money they need to provide all the services students require. There's been amazing resistance from classroom teachers and parents to that project, and we've stopped it from being entirely successful, and we have to take credit for that. I think at the same time, people have been frightened or unwilling to acknowledge what we have already ceded, pre-Trump 2.0, and the role of the Democratic Party in that process.

Though there's been strong pushback to Trump and the GOP's terrible policies banning DEI, the solutions being put forward ignore how new versions of privatization are being advanced. The roots are in standardized testing, educational technology, and public-private partnerships.

I think this has occurred because the unions have been complicit in the project. Another factor is we have generations of teachers who don't know what school was like without standardized testing.

ABBY: *I don't!*

LOIS: That's right. But there was a time when the curriculum was set by the districts. They had a district curriculum office, and the states had curriculum offices and the states set the standards. And it was politically contested, as I think it should be. People don't realize that these standards on which kids are tested and teachers are evaluated, and on which schooling is based entirely come out of the PISA, OECD, and World Bank. And they were promulgated to make schools more competitive, make the country more competitive in a global economy, and to make individuals more competitive in a global economy. So what's happened is that we still have the standardized tests, but we also now have this preponderance of software and platforms that control and surveil. And that software has limited what teachers can do even in this confined academic terrain. For example, many districts have adopted new reading and math programs with accompanying software. Every answer a student gives, *every* keystroke that a teacher makes, *everything* is documented by this software.

So some people might say, well, we want to make sure the teachers are really doing their job. But what no one discusses is that *all* that work that the students and the teachers are doing is being fed into AI, with the national unions' approval. Profits in edtech and AI aren't a topic educators discuss. Who's talking about it? Corporations in edtech. When you read their news reports, you see their plan. It's not a conspiracy and yet we've missed how they've successfully embedded AI. And what are they going to do with AI, Abby?

Abby: *Get rid of teachers.*

LOIS:: Yes, what they're going to do with AI is replace teachers. I know some people will say, "Oh, that can never happen. That can never happen. You'll always need the human touch." Well, maybe the human touch will be in cleaning up when the kids vomit. Or giving them a hug or breaking up a fight. The project is that instruction will occur with AI. And that's one reason that class size maximums are so important. Corporations and billionaires want classes to be of hundreds of students. They think it would be great to have one super teacher do the reading instruction for all the first graders in the school, maybe the district. At first you'll have teachers looking over her students' work, but then that teacher is going to be replaced by a bot. That's what they have in mind, control of the curriculum (with software and standardized tests) and instruction with AI. And people who are advancing that project contributed heavily to both Harris and to Trump and are now mostly in Trump's camp.

ABBY: *The Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 has been a focal point of many educators' concerns. Yet, what I'm hearing from you is that analysis of Project 2025 has missed a bigger agenda, one that is bipartisan.*

LOIS: We've mostly missed the boat in the way we've pushed back against Trump. Trump and his refashioning of the GOP has combined different forces, which include MAGA (represented by Steve Bannon) as well as venture capital, investment banking, and private equity. They have an overlapping interest - profit and power - but also contradictory economic interests and different ideological assumptions. There are important schisms in the Right that we should be looking at seriously, trying to understand how to position ourselves to fight for what we want.

The Hoover Institution developed and publicized the neoliberal project. Two men at Hoover developed ideas about free market schools and charters, Chubb and Moe, in 1990. They also wrote a book in 2009 about the role of educational technology in higher education, laying out many of the policies we've seen used (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Chubb & Moe, 2009; Hoover Institution, 2020). However, a more activist wing of the Right decided the Hoover Institution too fusty, too academic and not activist enough, and formed the Heritage Foundation.

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) is an offshoot of the Hoover Institute, and like Hoover it is dedicated to the “free market” (a definition of “free” that doesn’t prevent them from pushing policies that allow companies to profit off taxpayers’ money). AEI’s most persuasive voice is Rick Hess, who is the education specialist for AEI. Hess is very personable and very persuasive, and he really is a researcher unlike many other pundits for the Right.

In an earlier version of our interview, before Trump was elected, I pointed out Hess wrote a piece explaining why the United States Department of Education is probably not going to be taken down (Klein, 2023). As you’ll recall, what this suggested to me is that the “free market” wing of capital was going to defend the political terrain of AEI, a terrain that includes still having a Department of Education. Why would they want the Department of Education to remain open?

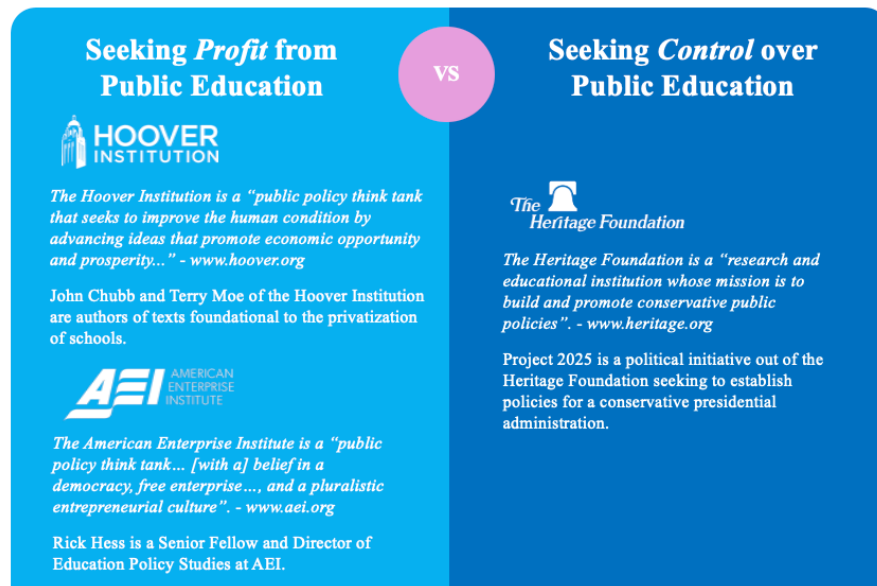


Figure 1. The key distinction between research organizations and think tanks working in education on the political right.

ABBY: So then they have oversight over it?

LOIS: So that they protect profit.

Abby: And that.

LOIS: And that is what has occurred. Many elements of Silicon Valley have supported liberal campaigns to save the Department of Education. They want profit. Oversight is good, but Hoover, Heritage, and AEI are not as concerned about oversight, they are concerned with profit. Although their interests overlap because they want to privatize schools, the Heritage Foundation is concerned with ideological control. That’s why they criticized Musk’s role in the Trump administration - before Trump made noises about muzzling him. I am currently, as of April 1, 2025, writing an article that discusses Trump’s recent executive order to close the U.S. Department of Education. In it I express concern over the national teachers’ unions’ strategy to rely on lawsuits. They should organize a mass mobilization of teachers in response to this order, but as we know, the situation is constantly evolving.

ABBY: Okay, I'm with you.

LOIS: Understanding the new political terrain also requires seeing how the standardized testing we have in the United States is really based on educational policies linked to economic plans of

the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the accompanying Programme for International Student Assessment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, n.d.; PBS Newshour, 2023). The Common Core was created in response to these demands about creating a different work force. Although we in education don't think of the Common Core in this way, investors are ecstatic that it created a de facto national curriculum, which in turn created a national market for their products - software and platforms. Corporations saw "This is a national market, wow! We don't have to create software for just one state. We can scale it up! Sell the same software to every state and district!" AI has now upped the ante because the big money in edtech is now in AI. The Right also has Christian conservatives and big money funding the Heritage Foundation projects who want to control curriculum.

I think where this discussion takes us is the reason we have to get rid of these Common Core standards and standardized testing. We have to go to a time when parents, teachers, students, and community voices counted, a time when curriculum was politically contested in districts and states. That's the point about democracy. It's a political contestation about what teachers teach, and how they teach, which we saw in battles over when schools should be open during COVID. It was ugly but I think we can't be afraid of those struggles. Teachers and their unions were very courageous in defending safe conditions under a President who did all he could to undercut the health threat.

ABBY: That feels to me like a possible entry point for educators who might not have this knowledge about funding, private equity, the American Enterprise Institute, etc. For those educators who might feel like this conversation is far removed from their work teaching young people in classrooms each day, maybe their entry point for resistance to these dynamics is with standardized testing.

LOIS: I think Trump's actions have begun to radicalize a new generation that will want to act about political issues, like deportations and the rights of trans kids. And we should support that. We must simultaneously be looking at how these struggles relate to the Right's program for pedagogy. And that requires scrutiny of testing. And the standards with it. Shouldn't educators have a voice? Shouldn't the parents, and families, and community, and the kids have a voice about what's tested, how much time you spend on math, what an engaging math curriculum looks like? How much time you spend on literacy, whether the kids have recess. What have we done taking away recess to kids?

ABBY: It's so concerning. It's 2024 and I started teaching in public schools in 2010, which is nearly 15 years ago at this point. And I have never seen, as an educator, what school looks like without testing. In every school I have been in, it's always been math and ELA are the two dominant subjects and everything else is marginal.

LOIS: That's because you didn't teach in an elite, private school. Those schools don't spend their time on testing. Perhaps they care about the SAT, which has unfortunately been reintroduced as part of college admissions. Many of the Silicon Valley elite don't let their kids have cell phones or iPads. And those kids don't learn how to fill in bubble sheets. They go to Montessori schools or schools that focus on the arts or the environment. Now I'm not saying we want that same education for our kids, because a competitive, hyper intellectualized environment chews up kids. It can destroy their souls and their desire to learn. So I'm not advocating we imitate their schools but I'm showing you a place where there's no testing.

ABBY: For teachers, COVID certainly deepened the integration of technology into classrooms, or did for a time. But I'm curious if you see anything in the relationships between COVID, technology, and the current political climate of teaching.

LOIS: A report by Ben Williamson and Anna Hogan for Education International describes it (Williamson & Hogan, 2020). It outlines how the project of privatization with the software education business began before COVID in 2018. It's a fabulous piece of research, but it's

incredibly chilling. We didn't catch the project when it started. We're in a race and we're one step behind the people who have power and money. One way that we're a step behind is in research. Right now there are only a handful of people in the Anglophone world who are doing this research.

Chris Saldaña did an interview with Ben Williamson with NEPC that was really interesting (National Education Policy Center, 2023). Williamson, Molnar, and Boninger also have a good policy brief about safeguards schools should adopt in using EdTech (Williamson, Molnar, & Boninger, 2024). Some research has been done but not much and we're coming very late to the project. During COVID we used the one tool we had to educate kids, online learning. We didn't have choices and many teachers made good use of it. But no one realized it was the Trojan horse. COVID invited an intensive use of the technology in schools with no controls.

Since I say so much that's critical of EdTech I want to clarify I have enjoyed teaching small classes online. There are some aspects of online teaching that are very exciting and better than face to face. I taught the same social foundations class one semester face-to-face and online. The best discussions we had were in the online class. I think the deepest learning occurred there because of those discussions and my pedagogy. I was able to engage with students one-on-one online about their ideas in ways that would have been impossible in a face-to-face class. And though teaching took more of my time, I liked being able to do it from home. At the same time, some students said they didn't like the online format and needed personal interaction. What would have been preferable was a blended format. but as soon as you have a blended format, you exclude people who are coming from a great distance and one of the benefits of our discussions was that the students taught all over the state, in amazingly different contexts, and not just the urban districts close to the university.

Abby: *Right.*

LOIS: There are real benefits to a rigorous, well-taught online class where there is small enrollment and the faculty member knows how to use all the technology well. We should be making *use* of that technology, but not doing it with these public-private partnerships that allow private companies access to our data and profit off of the schools. Public schools do not have any money to spare for profit. That's it. Not a penny for profit.

ABBY: *Earlier we talked about the importance of teachers participating in resistance to testing and Common Core standards. I am also hearing you say that there needs to be more research in this area.*

LOIS: Absolutely. And researchers need to write for a more popular audience. We need spaces where researchers share and apply what they know about schools, including how teachers unions can fulfill their progressive potential. For me that's described in being a critical friend. We need union support in ending standardized testing, and in saying profits for tech companies have no place in the public sector. We've already made progress on testing. Individual teachers and parents were the first to demand the tests be curtailed, and then union members brought their opposition to testing to their unions. Most recently the Massachusetts Teachers Association, an NEA affiliate, which is led by activists who are in a rank-and-file caucus committed to social justice, succeeded in working with the AFT affiliate and locals to organize and win a state ballot initiative that eliminated their standardized test as a requirement for graduation. They faced huge donations to defeat it and yet they won.

Even in the best unions, teachers who understand the danger we face with the intensification of software and platform use and AI are going to have to lead, with parents, bringing the issue to their unions and in the process, educating their colleagues. We can't depend on the teachers' unions to do this, and we cannot depend on politicians to do it. It has to be our self-organization.

ABBY: *As always.*

LOIS: *As always.*

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INTERVIEWER

Abby C. Emerson is an assistant professor of education at Touro University in New York City. Her work centers on antiracist and abolitionist teacher education, a critique of whiteness, restorative justice, and arts-based research methodologies. As an elementary school teacher she was named the 2018 National Association for Multicultural Education's critical teacher of the year. She leads a youth art group called Repair & Transform and organizes with the NYC public library action network.